
氷の国のアマリリス
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AMARYLLIS IN THE ICE COUNTRY
電撃文庫

はるかな未来。世界は氷に閉ざされた。
人間たちは地下の冷凍睡眠施設で遠い春を待ち、
施設を維持するためのロボットたちは
そこに《村》を作って暮らしていた。
いつか〝人間(ごしゅじんさま)〟と暮らす日を夢見て。
これはそんな《氷の国》の物語。

氷の国のアマリリス

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アマリリス・
アルストロメリア
ロボットたちの《村》の副村長を務める少女。元保育士ロボットで面倒見がよく、生真面目。
氷に覆われた大地の下で、〝人間(ごしゅじんさま)〟たちの目覚めを夢見ながら生活するロボットたち。
《村》の『評議員』であるアマリリスとアイスバーンのふたりは、村民たちにバッテリーやスペアパーツを供給する作業を続けていた。しかし、100年にもわたる極限零下の生活は、ロボットたちの身体を少しずつ蝕み
――余剰パーツなどが底をつきはじめ、《村》はゆるやかに滅びの道へと進んでいた……。



アイスバーン・トリルキルティス

《村》の『評議会（カウンシル）』の一員でよくアマリリスとコンビを組む。ロボットのくせに女性を口説くという悪癖がある。

カトレア

《村》一番の美女ロボット。『評議員』ではないが、村民の集会などでは司会進行を務める。



『評議会（カウンシル）』は代表――『評議員』によって《村》の方針を決定する機関である。アマリリスとアイスバーンに加え『整備士』ビスカリア、緊急事態の頼れる『鉄腕』ゲッツ、そして「節電じゃ」が口癖の村長・カモミールの5人がメンバーだ。今日（こんにち）のパーツ問題や、最近起こり始めた地下空洞の崩落事故などの対策会議が連日のように行われている。しかし、解決策は未だ見いだせていない――。

ゲッツ

『鉄腕』の異名をとる『評議員』の一人。元役者ロボットで、顔の人工皮膚を剥がしているのが『素』。

カモミール

《村》の長を務めるロボット。いわゆる『生首』状態なのはボディ分の電力を節電するため、らしい。



ビスカリア・アカンサス

『評議員』の一人。《村》一番の『整備士』で村民たちのメンテナンス・修理を一手に引き受ける。


山積みになった問題が、まさに崩れんとしはじめた日、カモミール村長が姿を消した。行方を追い、発見したアマリリスと『評議員』たちは、村長のまとう雰囲気が、いつもと違うことに違和感を覚える。いくつかのやりとりの後、彼は……厳かにこう告げた。



「わしは――
人類は滅亡すべきだと思う」

絶句するアマリリスと、戸惑う『評議員』たち。
〝人間（ごしゅじんさま）〟を滅ぼすべき……それは〝彼ら（ロボット）〟の存在意義を揺るがすものだった。問題がありつつも平穏ではあったロボットたちの《村》は、この日を境に大きく変貌していくこととなる――。

Amaryllis in the Ice Country

氷の国のアマリリス

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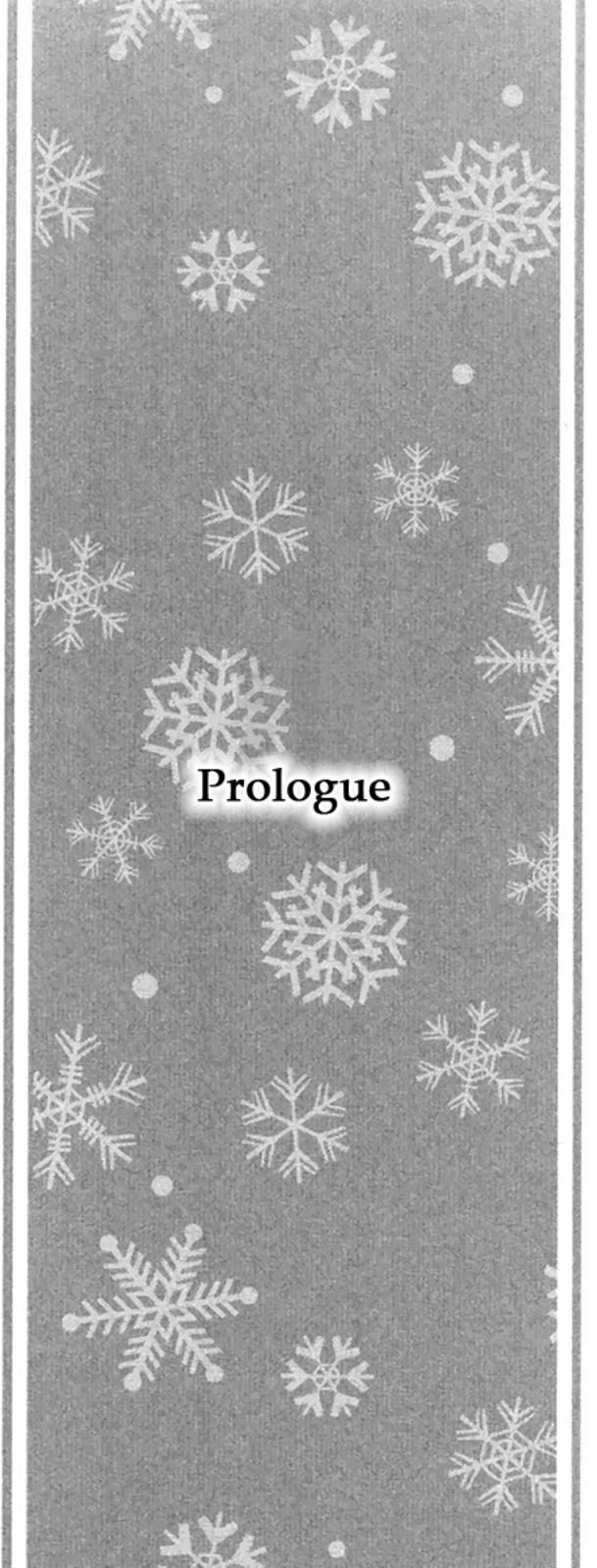
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design:Toru Suzuki

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Prologue

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The sun dazzled upon the little garden in the nursery.

“Don’t cry anymore, Fuu. Okay?”

I did my best to appease the girl letting out large drops of tears.

However, no matter how much I tried to do so, she wouldn’t stop.

“Yuu! Apologize now!”

“I’m not in the wrong.”

Yuu pouted his lips to the side.

This biggest bully in the nursery just couldn’t get along with Fuu for some reason.

“It’s her fault for not kicking the ball to me anyway!”

“But Fuu’s the one who started playing with the ball first. Why did you snatch it away?”

“I made her lend it to me, but she wouldn’t.”

“Goodness…”

The sky-blue ball at the feet rolled, swaying leisurely in the breeze.

“Fuu, here’s the ball.”

“Waaahhh!”

“Yuu, apologize.”

“Don’t wanna.”

—Uu…what do I do now?

I really do like kids, but I'm really at my wits' end at such a situation.

—What do I do? What do I do…?

Just when I'm at a loss as to what to do.

"Oya oya? What's the matter?"

The ball floated gently, and the one picking it up showed his usual genial smile.

"Principal…!"

"Good work there."

Principal consoled me as he smiled, the wrinkles on his face further emphasized as he patted on the heads of Yuu and Fuun.

"You want to play with this ball?"

He asked tenderly, and Fuu nodded.

"You want to play with this ball?"

Yuu was faced with the same question, and his head remained tilted aside as he nodded.

"I see, I see."

Principal nodded, and let the ball swirl rapidly on his fingertips. The sky blue ball rumbled as it spun on his index finger; Yuu and Fuu widened their eyes as they saw this.

"Since both of you want this ball—"

Principal beamed, and did a barehanded chopping action.

“I shall ‘half it’.”

A hundred years passed thereafter.

Till this day, I could still recall the scenes that day.

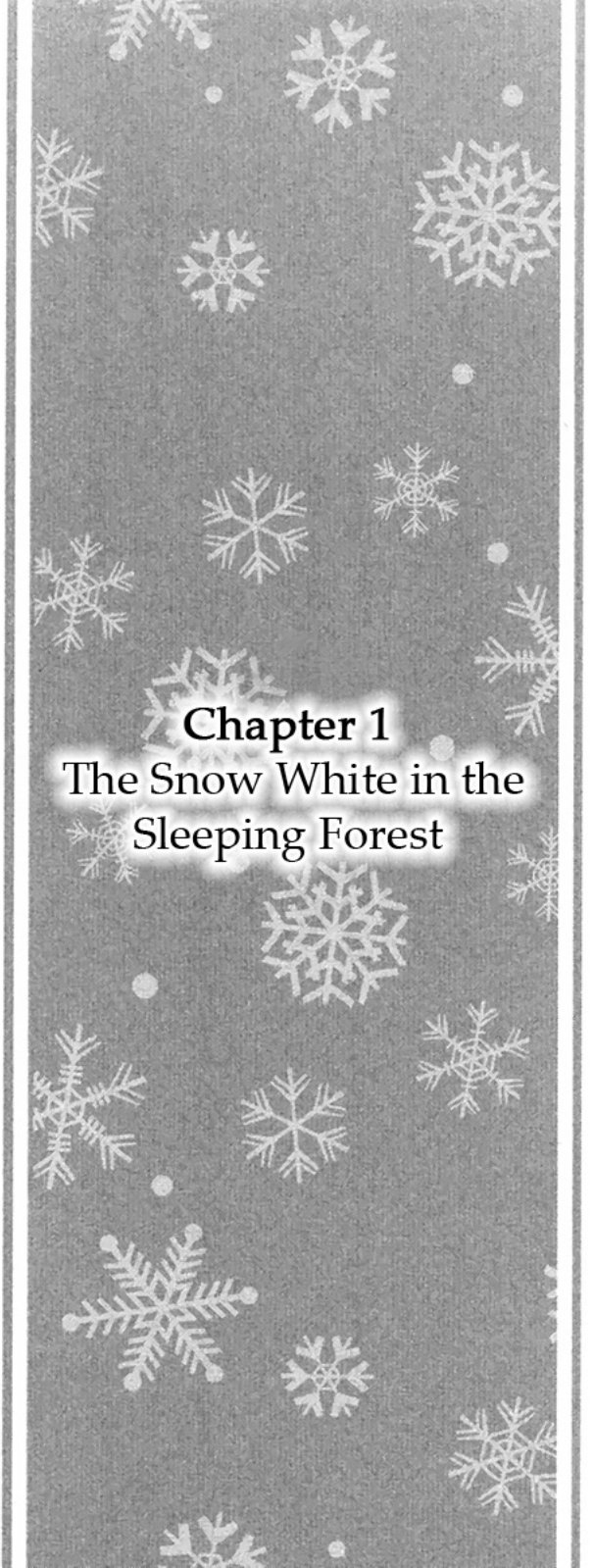
A blue, blue sky, a warm sun, a dazzling golden nursery, the impish face showed by the Principal, and kids showing sparkling eyes.

Time passed, the Principal passed away, Yuu, Fuu and the other kids became adults. They advanced in age, and finally died off.

On this world, I am the only one who knew about all these. These memories will never fade away.

At the final moment before my consciousness was cut off, I suddenly wondered.

Ah, Principal, my dear Principal— Is my ‘Halving’ considered a success?



Chapter 1
The Snow White in the Sleeping Forest

Chapter 1 – The Snow White in the Sleeping Forest

There are refracted blobs of light, and gust lifting the powder snow.

–Ehh…!

I hold onto the handles firmly, tilting the icemobile firmly. In the meantime, I spin the steering wheel to the right to climb the mid-wall, and after a pause, I turn left to the curb, and then to the right curb immediately. The tunnel of ice continues to extend, and though the scenery is simple and repetitive, I can't relax one bit.

The temperature is -16 Degrees Celsius, fairly warm compared to how it usually is. In this underground world, where the walls and ceiling are completely frozen, the breath released between the lips floats back like a white comet.

"I say, it's about time to rest now, isn't it?"

I hear an unenthusiastic voice behind me,

"We've been travelling for 6 hours already!"

–Really.

I ignore the voice of this colleague who wants to slack, and strengthen my grip on the handles of the three-wheeled vehicle. Right, right, left, right, left. There's a need for continuous cornering skills in the tunnel, and in those moments, I'll lower my waist and twist my body. I match my breathing with the bounce, absorb the impact of the shocks with my knees, and shift my weight in a rhythmic manner, "Hey, you listening, Amaryllis? Hey, Amaryllis Alstroemeria?"

"Shut up…!"

I shout out, cutting off that cheesy voice, and continue to turn. The goal's near, another 30 seconds, 20, 10. There's a light at the end of the narrow tunnel, a wide world out there– –Now…!

Bonk! We bounce off the ice floor, towards the very tall place that's like a dance hall.

–Brake…!

I maintain the balance of the vehicle, and at the same time, activate the reverse jets to kill the speed as we land. Donk. The skates crashed onto the floor, bouncing off like a rubber several times. The wheels gain balance, and manage to land while killing the impact.

"Phew…"

I fasten the front wheels to steady the vehicle, and finally heave a sigh of relief. I'm able to control the icemobile like my own limbs after driving it for so long, but I still feel tense falling from such a great height.

"Hah!"

And with a growl, my colleague sitting beside me landed too. Seeing the skates of a massive vehicle land and smash the ice with style is always a highlight.

"Goodness, well, we made it…"

He clicked his tongue, stroking the swept back hair that he's so proud of.

Can't you just land a little quietly? while he reminded me.

"Sorry to keep you waiting."

A tranquil voice echoes in the hall.

I turn to look, and find a tall, slender woman there. She's as pretty as a goddess, her hair glittering like an emerald.

“Cattleya, it’s been a while!”

“Thank you as usual, Miss Amaryllis.”

Cattleya pets her pretty, silky hair as she shows a gentle smile. If we’re talking about the prettiest lady in the lady, she’ll be the first I’ll nominate.

“How about it, Cattleya? Are you free tonight?”

“I-I’ll be troubled, Mr Eisbahn.”

–This idiot!!

“Ow, owwwwww!!”

I tug the antenna at the ears hardly, pulling this beast away from the pretty woman.

“Enough already.”

“What? Just a little touch?”

“How many times must you be reminded to not woo girls during your work?”

“It’s a man’s duty to pursue a pretty lady.”

“Talk about that only when we’re done with our work and duty here.”

And like usual, we continue be bicker.

“erm…I think it’s time to begin the delivery?”

I look back, and find Cattleya giving a troubled, stunned look, “Ahh, sorry sorry. We’ll do it now.” I hurriedly apologize.

“Hurry!”

“Help out too!”

I chide my colleague who isn’t doing anything, and begin to unload the goods from the icemobile. The backup batteries, spare parts, charging cables–these are all standard issue. We robots are powered by electricity, so any items related to batteries are necessities.

“How’s the ‘torso’ looking now?”

Cattleya receives the issued items as she asks me with a soft voice, “Same as usual, peace and calm. As for any incident, it’s just about how much Daisy and Gappy argued.”

“Huh, again?”

“They’re on so bad terms it’s worrying.”

“What’s the reason again this time?”

“It looks like they were fighting over Oil Candy. We already said that we’ll ‘half’ them in this situation, but they wouldn’t listen.”

“Oh dear.”

Cattleya beamed happily, and I continue talking as I sort the items out. We only meet once a week, so there’s a lot for us to talk.

And right when we’re about done unloading the goods, “Ah.”

Cattleya look up at the sky.

–Aky…

Sparkling lights begin to fall gently from the ceiling. These are speckles of ice called Ceiling Dust, and though they are called dust, they are able to give off such a beautiful light and flutter from the skies. This is one of the rare natural phenomenon in this world of ice 500m underground, isolated from the world.

“So pretty…” Cattleya muttered as she looked up.

“You’re prettier.” Eisbahn said as he put his arm over Cattleya’s shoulder.

“Leave her already.” I pull Eisbahn aside.

The speckles of light continue to flutter and gather in the hall. Each of them form complicated crystals in the shape of ‘six-sided flowers in three layers’, prettier as they overlap each other, coating the silver world with a formation makeup of snow.

“Time to go.”

“Ehh~ let me rest for a little while.”

“No can do. We got another 30 houses to go to.”

I drag the slacker of a colleague by his arm, and ride on the icemobile. “Tchee!” While Eisbahn gives such a childish reaction, I ignore him and start the engines. The icemobile bellows excitedly, rumbling, “See you, Cattleya!”

“Be safe!”

Cattleya’s voice can be heard from behind, and I charge into the tunnel, headed to the next point. The goods piled up at the back of the icemobile rattle. Though Eisbahn’s been grumbling, he lean his body firmly onto me.

I accelerate, and the ice crystals sticking on my fringe glitter as they drift to the back.

“Big sister!” “Welcome back!” “Amaryllis!”

I return to the village, and the children gather. Soon, I’m surrounded by at least ten of them. 20 hours passed after a trip through the assigned path, and I return to the ‘torso’ again.

“I’m back, everyone. Have you been good kids?”

I pat each one of them on the hand, and they all reach their heads

out to me, going *I want, I want.*

"Listen, listen! I've worked hard to do a lot of 'parts shining'!"

"Really? That's great!"

"Sister, I did a lot of 'cutouts'!"

"That's really great!"

The children narrow their eyes happily as they get pat on the heads by me. They're all holding blue glowing translucent metals in their hands; the job of the children in this village is to use and polish these metals.

"Sister, let's play, let's play!"

"Sorry. I still have a lot of work to do. Later then."

I coax the children who continue to cling onto me, and leave the scene. I do want to stay with them for a little longer, but the most important thing is that I have to report what happened today.

I hurry down the road in the village. The sides of the road are lined with rows and rows of ice sculpted houses, and the light shining from the ceiling are sparkling like a starry sky.

I continue to marvel this typical, beautiful street scenery as I hurry on, and at this moment, "Hey~Amaryllis! Good work!"

I'm called by a lively voice, and opposite the road, a tall woman is raising her hand, waving at me.

"I'm back, Viscaria. The icemobile tyres feel a little weird."

"Got it. I'll have a look."

"It's parked at the usual place."

"Okay."

Viscaria Acanthus extends the feeler from her finger as response. Her arms are made of metallic feelers, meant for repairs, tools like screwdrivers, hammers, pincers, spanners, and bars contained within them. The 'mechanic' in the village refers to her.

Viscaria points a feeler from her right index finger, and adjusts the beret on her short red hair. This beret is her trademark.

"Haven't you been working too much? It's taxing on your body if you don't rest."

"Thanks, but I'm fine here."

"If you feel unwell anywhere, give me a shout."

She waves the hand with the feeler pointed out, says 'goodbye', and leaves. Viscaria has the appearance of a 25-year-old woman, and to me, she's someone who's like a reliable older sister to me.

"Yo, Amaryllis!" "Welcome back, vice chief!" "Good work today!"

"Everyone, I'm back!"

I answer their greetings with enthusiasm, and continue to move forward.

After walking about 15 minutes, I'm finally able to see the village hall. It's a thick ice pillar that stands between the ground and the ceiling, and the town hall is located inside this hollow ice pillar. This is the central area of the village, one that has yet to change over 100 years.

I pass through the main doors that are shaped in an arch, and the first thing I see is the open atrium hall. I attach the cable placed on the reception counter to my arm, and let it charge for 5 minutes. Back, then, I had to keep changing oils to maintain the internal functions, but with the rapid developments of robotics engineering, simply recharging batteries alone is enough to keep me running.

–My battery is recharged. 99.98%.

Once I'm done recharging, I continue to the inside of the village hall. I continue on by skating down the polished, shiny floor, down the corridor, and ascend the stairs. My feet step on the anti-slippery powder scattered on the stairs, qew qew, letting out a cute sound.

I ascend the last flights of stairs, and in front of me is a transparent, tall door.

"Village Chief Chamomile!"

I raise my voice.

"It's Amaryllis! I'm back1′

Soon after, I hear a voice, "...Come in." and the doors slide open. "Please excuse me!" I step into the Village Chief's room excitedly.

The Chief's room is the core. The silver patterns on the ceiling race around, spreading throughout the entire wall like Tulip antennas stuck onto them. All the communications network in the village are centered around here, whether wired or not.

"Welcome back, Amaryllis."

The Chief turns his 'head' over to me with a rumble. Ever since he gave up on his body 30 years ago, the Chief continues to live on with merely a head. He's able to save on electricity without a head "This is saving electricity too." and that is his usual mantra.

"How are you feeling?"

"My shoulders been a little stiff recently..."

"So I suppose there is nothing."

I ignore that light-hearted joke as usual, and sit on the chair..

"Now then, the report for today."

“What is Eisbahn doing?”

“Chasing after the butts of many young girls.”

“Good to be young. When I was younger, I was called the Iron Playboy–”

“I shall skip on that since it is the 370th time you’re mentioning that.”

If I leave him to continue, I’ll have to hear a long autobiography that will last for at dozens of hours, so I pinch the Chief by his nose. He snorts, letting out a weird sound.

“Report. A round of delivery through 56 Issue points was done.”

“Um, good work.”

“There are 3 with metallic frostbite. Light injuries though, so just a change of parts.”

“3…that’s a little too many.”

“Maybe it’s because the recent difference in temperatures causing it. I intend to focus on
Treating frostbites during the next ‘body checkups’.”

“Good.”

I then propose another 2-3 ideas, and the Chief understand them all. If it gets a lot serious, there is a need to summon the members of the of the ‘committee’. Other than that, the little problems are to be settled by the Chief. That is the rule of this village.

“Are you going to check on the ‘Snow White’?”

“Yes. It’s a daily thing…how about you go have a look too, Chief?”

“No, I’ll sleep…fuuahh.”

The Chief yawn, his head rolls onto the table, and he leaps onto the cushion he loves so much.

“Got to save electricity…”

He mutters his usual mantra, and immediately went to sleep mode.

I return to the entrance of the village, and see Viscaria busy with repairs.

There are a few more metallic feelers, and 10 of these chords are reaching out, surrounding the icemobile and nimbly doing all kinds of independent maintenance on it. Everywhere, there are sounds of metal, tools hitting, blue flashes of laser and steam being released.

“How’s it going?”

I poke my head to see. “Yeah.” Viscaria answers me as she lies on the floor. The way she leans under the icemobile resembles a frog who got got knocked down in an accident. The iconic beret has landed by her side.

“There’s a little problem with the vehicle itself…the wheels can’t be used anymore, so I’m changing them.”

“Good work.”

“Where did you flip the vehicle?”

“No I didn’t. Why?”

“There’s a strange crack on the handles…”

Viscaria points “Here, have a look.”, and flickers one of her feelers to show me.

“Ah, it’s true.”

As she says, there’s a web-shaped crack on the icemobile steering wheel.

“But such cracks can appear when there is a drastic difference in temperature…”

“So it can’t be used anymore?”

“No no, it’s easy to repair it. Just melt the cracked part, and add soft cream back to it.”

“Please do so.”

“Got it.”

Viscaria utilizes her right feelers nimbly, repairing many areas. All these feelers are moving in a lively manner.

“You’re really dazzling a lot when you’re repairing things, Viscaria.”

“Really? I’m glad.”

The repairman with the matching red short hair curls her lips up slightly, looking very delighted. She, whom I view as a reliable older sister, looks like a mischievous boy in such moments.”

“I’ve been doing this for more than 300 years. I’m at the point where I can’t calm down if I don’t repair anything.”

“Heh, I guess that’s our calling.”

“Calling…maybe it is, I don’t know.”

After that, Viscaria continues to repair for another 5 minutes. “Alright, I’m done.” She shouts, and the feelers reaching out from her fingertips shrink back with a swoosh.

“Are you going over to ‘Snow White’ today?”

“Yep. It’s a daily thing.”

I get onto the icemobile, activating the engines with a boom.

“If you find that there’s something wrong, come back to look for me.”

“Understood. Thanks as always, Viscaria.”

“Well. It’s my calling.”

With a swoosh, she reaches a feeler from her fingertip, adjusting her beret proudly.

And so,

“Why are you following me too!?”

“Don’t be so cold to me.”

“Seriously, stop touching around! You big pervert!”

I lash out furiously at the man who’s hitching a ride on the back seat. The man continues to sneer, saying, “Well well, let’s get along.” He has no intention of reflecting on his actions at all.

Here’s how it happened. I bid farewell, got up onto the icemobile, preparing to look at the ‘Snow White’. “I’m going too!” A guy with blond swept back hair leaps into the back seat–the name is Eisbahn Tricrytis.

I slap the filthy hand that’s aiming for my butt, and accelerate the speed of the icemobile. If I don’t hurry there, I don’t know what this sex offender sitting behind me will do.

“You’re being cold to me.”

“Of course. I need to be as cold as possible to a guy like you who starts wooing girls at any given moment,: “It’s fine. We all have sex options installed on us.”

This sex options refers to one of the functions installed in us robots that allows us robots to have sex. There are a lot of sex options installed in female robots, and I’m one of them.

“Sex options are prepared to service our masters. Not a good thing to be used on robots ourselves.”

“It’s because of such words from you that you’ll always remain as a virgin–guah!?”

I smash an elbow into the unruly guy behind me, “Enough with that small talk…!” and growl.

Male robots with sex options installed in them will often tease women of the same kind or do some sweet talk to create some atmosphere. Most of the time, I guess they can’t help it because they have such a setting, but Eisbahn in particular goes overboard. This guy will get his hand on a woman whenever he sees one.

–Ahh, let’s hurry up and reach there already…!

While I continue on this unhappy two people ride, I cut right and left quickly. Finally, the surrounding ice walls become clearer, and the layers of ice start to show a vibrant green. The villagers call this place the ‘Ice Plant’ zone , and all kinds of plants grow and bloom in the ice like art pieces. The end of this zone of Ice Plants is our destination today–the ‘REM Forest’.

Grrr! The brakes cause the vehicle to shave to road, and I park the icemobile. Eisbahn quickly gets off the boot.

“Chief, do you hear me? I’m Amaryllis.”

I cover the antenna at my ear with my hand, calling the Chief through the wireless, “Fuuuaaa…saving power, saving power…” only to hear a sleepy voice.

“Stop sleeping and open up.”

I chide, “Alright.” and the Chief’s voice echoes in the Mind Circuit. The doors leading to ‘Snow White’ is probably about a 1m thick, and nobody is allowed to enter without the Chief’s permission. Even I, or a ‘committee member’ like Eisbahn can’t do so.

–It’s cold…

The moment the door opens, rich cold air resembling a white phantom rushes out. While this underground world is encased in ice, the temperature here is colder.

–External air intercept.

I increase the body temperature conditioning function by about 30%. Robots won't catch colds because of the cold temperature, but the oils or batteries inside the bodies may be damaged. In worse situations, there might be a sudden metallic exhaustion caused 'Metal Frostbite.

"Nothing changed."

I looked up at the ceiling, and the first thing I see is a large 'Spindle'. This is the main computer controlling the entire 'Snow White'. The surroundings of this Spindle is covered with thin blood vessel-like fibers, appearing like a freeze dried fruit with a thin silver dress wrapped over it.

The Spindle continues to spin its massively long, slender body, shining its gentle light upon every corner of the room. This light is a unique 'pulse' that maintains the running of the system, and maintains the numerous capsules called 'Cradles' that have become one with the wall. These Cradles are the life supports protecting the lives of more than 300 of the 'Masters'.

Nbsp;

This is the cryo facility that allows for life to continue under low temperatures–dubbed 'Snow White'.

A hundred years ago, there was a massive weather change on the surface, and the world went into an ice age. Due to unknown reasons, the 'cold wave' caused the entire land to freeze, and all animals and plants were practically extinct.

But even in such radically harsh environment, humans–our masters never gave up. They built an underground shelter 'Snow White' to evacuate, and hibernate in there until the ice age ends. From babies till old people, 300 hundred humans continue to sleep, their aging process stopped in the process.

And during the days the masters sleep, us ‘villagers’ are tasked to maintain the running of the ‘Snow White’. In this world of ice 500m underground, we create a little village, living for a hundred years. All the villagers are robots, and our only important mission is to protect the Snow White. The Mind Circuit with high autonomy installed in us is to make sure we protect the Snow White while the manual mode can’t be used.

–One day.

I wonder as I look up at the Snow White.

One day, when the masters awake, I’ll do my best to serve them and prove my value, whether it is to cook, wash clothes or cleaning, anything that I can think of, I’ll do it. Also, if I’m allowed to, I want them to hear the songs I’m proud of.

I put my hands at my chest, humming the lullaby as usual.

Sleep well, sleep well, sleep well for today.

I shall continue to hold you in my arms, so sleep well.

One day, even if this country, is wiped out, the morning light, Everything, and anything, is for, you.

That is why, sleep well, for today.

Until, the day, you wake up again.

The tune ends, and I hear a light clapping.

“It’s a nice tune no matter how many times I hear it.”

I turn back to look, and find Eisbahn leaning at the wall.

“Ahh, thanks.”

“Feel like sleeping when I hear that.”

“Are you praising me?’

After a pause, “Of course.” Eisbahn answers.

–Master.

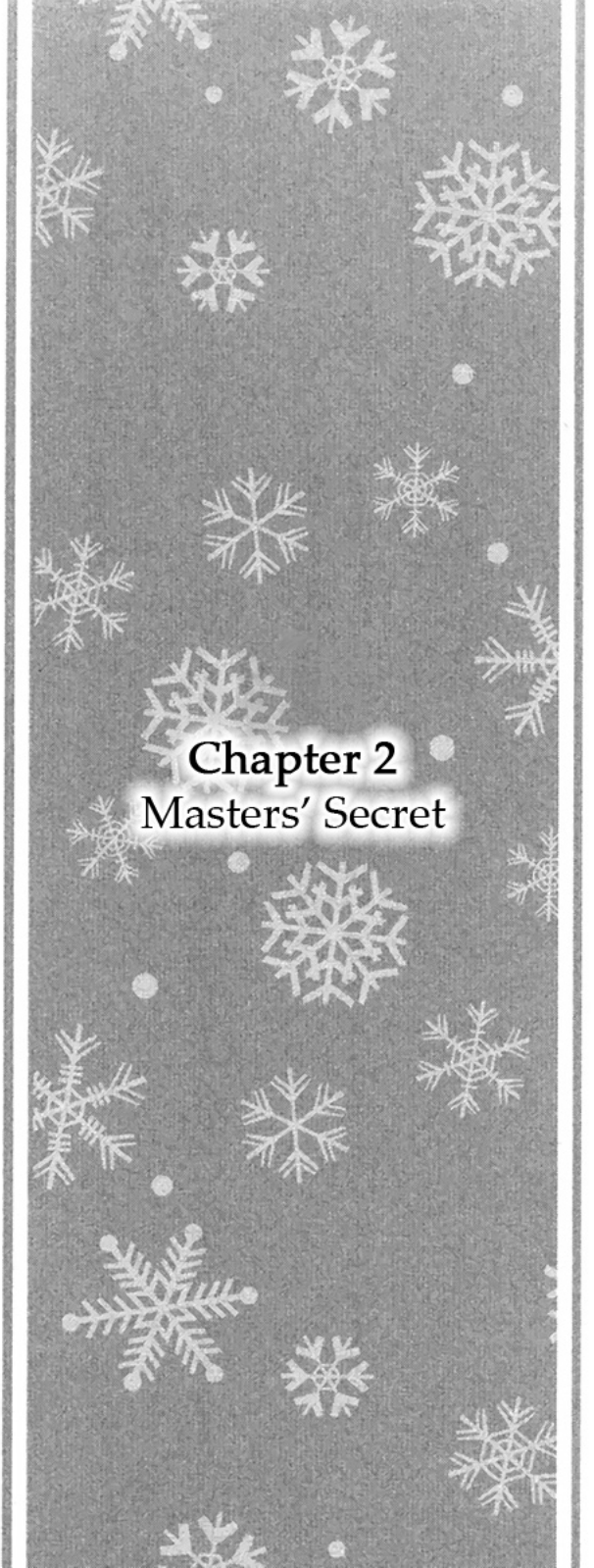
I cross my fingers in front of my chest, and offer my usual prayers.

–Please, hurry and wake up.

We are waiting.

Tentatively waiting for the day our masters wake up in this underground world sealed by ice.

We have been doing so for more than a hundred years.



Chapter 2
Masters' Secret

Chapter 2 – Masters' Secret

"I can scrap you with just a finger."

"Wh-what was that about!?"

"You're trashy, Gappy."

The one insulting is a petite girl called Daisy Stalk.

She has a vile tongue. Her appearance is that of a cute girl with soft, chestnut colored hair, but she's actually feisty and stubborn.

"I-I won't get scrapped."

And refuting weakly is a robot smaller than Daisy. He has a semi-spherical head, a plump, grey upper body, and old–fashioned caterpillar legs on the bottom. "I-I-I-I-I'm not...a piece of junk." his retort is lacking in vigor no matter how infuriated he is, for his voice installation is already faulty.

"I-I-I-I-I-I...Gappy."

White smoke is pumped out from Gappy's head. Whenever he gets excited, he'll short circuit, and the sound he makes in such situations is the cause of his nickname.

Daisy points her cute finger at Gappy, and it looks like she's declaring her victory.

"See, you're broken! You're a piece of junk here! Junk! Junk!"

"No-no...Ga-Ga...gappppeeee"

Gappy refutes, unable to form a coherent sentence as he rushes at Daisy. However, his sudden attack's easily dodged.

"Yay, you idiot!"

“D-d-damn it!”

–Seriously, again?

“Okay, enough already.”

I stand between the duo.

“Daisy, stop bullying Gappy now.”

“I wasn’t!”

“Master taught us before, no? ‘There is nothing worth disputing over’, and ‘being harmonious is beauty’.”

“We’re getting along well though!”

Daisy retorts. This child really is stubborn.

“Are you alright, Gappy?”

Worried, I check on Gappy. His head is fizzling with smoke, and screws popping out near his ears from time to time.

“I-I-I-I’m bine...”

He certainly does not appear to be fine.

“Well, never mind. Let’s go have a checkup with Viscaria later.”

I pick up the screws, and get him to stand up.

“Thank...py, Amar...ryllis.”

Gappy continues to use his faulty voice installation and thanks me.

“Better scrap that scrap as soon as possible.”

“Hey, Daisy. You shouldn’t be saying that.”

“But it’s true. He wanted to eat some of my oil candy.”

“Didn’t I say you can’t keep it all to yourself? In this situation, you should be ‘halving’ it.”

“Hmph.”

“Anyway, what’s the reason for your argument now?”

I ask, and Daisy explains everything about how they got into an argument, without holding anything.

Daisy said that they were playing ‘horsey’ that morning. Gappy was the ‘horse’, and Daisy was riding on him, shouting ‘gallop gallop, heh~!”. However, on the third time, Gappy lost his balance, and Daisy fell, her head landing on the road.

“Why were you playing horsey?”

“For an act.”

“An act?”

“For the Prayer Festival, of course.”

“Ahh, I see.”

The Prayer Festival is an annual festival, a ritual to pray for the masters sleeping in the ‘Snow White’.

“What are you performing this year, Amaryllis?”

“Hmm, probably a lullaby. Like last year.”

“Who will you go with?”

“That’s still undecided.”

There’s a stage for the Prayer Festival, and the villagers will perform all kinds of ‘acts’ on the stage. There is no limit to the content, we can sing, dance, play magic–of course, ‘playing horsey’ is fine too.

“I’m definitely going to win a prize this year! Watch me, Amaryllis!”

Daisy beams confidently as she enters my embrace. “I suppose.” And I give her a smile in return.

“I too…Ga, do my best…ppy.”

Gappy enters the conversation, and Daisy yells again “Time to practice!”, riding on him. It appeared that she was ‘piggybacking’ on the shoulders instead of playing horsey.

“Wait, Gappy needs to go for repairs.”

“You’ll break down soon anyway.”

“Even so, Gappy needs to prioritize his repairs…Viscaria! Viscaria!”

I called for the best repairman through the wireless communicator. Most of the villagers have a wireless receiver in their mind circuits, and as long as the microwaves are within vicinity, we can contact anyone at any given moment.

10 seconds later.

“What is it, Amaryllis?”

Viscaria’s voice rings in my mind.

“Gappy short-circuited. Can you help check on him?”

“What? Again? Okay, I’ll go take a look.”

“I’ll leave it to you.

Once I’m done with the communicator, “Now then, no practice until Viscaria arrives.” I told Daisy, and turn to leave.

Ga, ppy, I can hear the voice from behind.

“Amaryllis, I want a hug~” “Carry me please~” “Pat me~”

I entered the village, and the children approach me. Whenever that happens, I’ll either hug them or carry them or pat them. No matter boy or girl, child-model robots like to fawn around.

After playing around with them for 5 minutes or so, “Sorry.” “See you again.” “Next time” I apologized, and pushed aside the fawning children who were forming a wave. If I promised them all, I won’t be done even when the sun set.

“Okay, the kids over there, reach your hands over!”

The houses carved out of ice were lined side by side, forming a beautiful scenery of silver and white. The children are playing some games in the garden of the nursery, and there’s about two weeks until the prayer festival as everyone practises without thinking about anything else.

–Now, what shall I do...

I hear the cute singing voices of the children, wondering, –The problem here is that rule.

Every year, there is some rule in play for the prayer festival, and this year, it is a ‘male-female’ pair. To add on, last year, it was ‘to pair with a child’, and two years ago, it was ‘group with three or more people’. Every festival would have been the same if we didn’t change the rules a little, but even with this kind of mindset, it’s a little tricky.

–I have to find a partner...

I have a lot of options in choosing a child as a partner, like what I did last year. This year though, there’s a limitation of ‘choosing a robot of the opposite gender and a similar age’. My strong point is definitely singing, so i need to find an adult male who’s able to sing a duet with me.

“Goodness...now I have to look for a partner, and I don’t have a lot

of options left for me…”

Right when I’m muttering to myself, brooding over this,

“Don’t you have me?”

Suddenly, my shoulder was grabbed.

“Please do not touch me so casually.”

I slap the hand off. “Ow, it hurts.” Eisbahn pretentiously shouts out, combing the blond slicked back hair he’s so proud of.

“Don’t be shy.”

“Huh?”

“Why don’t you have a passionate makeout kiss with me? That’ll be the best act.”

“I rather be scrap metal than do that.”

I roll my eyes at Eisbahn, and he jokingly shrugs, showing no intent to reflect on his actions.

“And I already thought of who I want to pair with.”

“Heh. So who?”

“Erm…Götz.”

“You idiot. That foolhardy guy won’t do. He can’t sing or dance to save his own life.”

“Then the chief…”

“He’s old! You’re always so enthusiastic, yet a late bloomer when it comes to dealing with men.”

“Sh-shut up. I’m not going around wooing people like you. And

besides–”

At this moment.

Boom. A loud, booming sound echoes everywhere.

“Eh…?”

That’s an earthquake. The underground world of ice shakes, and it’s an intense earthquake. Before I know it, my hands are on the ground.

The tremor lasts for 10 seconds or so. However, this earthquake, which hasn’t happened in awhile, causes a huge commotion in the village, and all the children are crying.

“Hey, you alright, Amaryllis?”

“Eehh, I guess…”

–That was a huge one…

I look around, and the nearby buildings don’t seem to be obviously damaged. However, as the massive earthquake might trigger an earthquake, we’ll probably have to go around looking.

Right when I have this thought.

“All Senators are to gather for an emergency meeting. I repeat. All senators are to gather for an emergency meeting–!”

The Chief’s order enters the communicator, and we exchange looks before darting off.

All the other members are already present the moment we enter the Chief’s room.

The ‘head’, Village Chief Chamomile, is on the table, with the ‘mechanic’ Viscaria beside him. Seated by the side is Götz, dubbed the ‘iron arm’.

“Are you both fine?”

Götz raises his massive trunk-like right arm, cheerfully greeting us.

“Yes, we are.”

“Then, good.”

He has a tendency to end off his lines formally, as though it is a play, probably because he was originally a performance type robot, and rid himself of the artificial skin on his face to be able to portray all kinds of characters on the stage. Thus, the only parts left of his expression are the wrinkles between his eyebrows and the smile on his lips, and even as he was just sitting there normally, he seems a little terrifying. This masked man has a mask on, and as he’s dressed in a black collared suit, he looks like a mannequin dressed in a soldier uniform, giving off a really surreal vibe.

“Sorry, we’re late.”

“No, no. I would say that I have just arrived.”

Götz nods away with a stoic look. He may look scary on first glance, but he’s actually a kind person. The five of us, including him, are the ‘Senator’.

Anyway, the Senators here refer to the members of the ‘Committee’. There are basically two kinds of decision making bodies in the city. Things like changes in issuing supplies, treatment schedule and performances for the prayer programme will be decided by the ‘Committee’. In contrast, if it’s a big issue that can affect the future of the villagers, it will be decided by a ‘Village Meeting’ where everyone is involved.

“There’s no special reason to organize this meeting. Simply about the earthquake from just now.”

The chief raised the topic. That head rolls down the down.

“First, let’s have a look at this. –The Birdmap.”

In response to that voice, a faint light is given off from the table before us, and a map shows something resembling an ant hive. This is the ‘Birdmap’ that shows the entire village.

“Ah!”

This loud cry comes from Viscaria.

“The ‘right wing’ got blocked.”

“Yes.”

All of us look over at the map in unison. There’s a red light flickering on the path leading to the ‘right wing’. This is the signal indicating a problem.

Out of habit, we describe the appearance of the village as a ‘bird’. The center of the map is called the ‘body’, the core area with 80% of the villagers living here. In the 4 areas around the ‘body’, there are six sections gathered around it, the ‘head’, ‘tail’, ‘right wing’, ‘left wing’, ‘right foot’ and ‘left foot’. In any case, the ‘Snow White’ masters sleep in are located in the ‘head’, and right now, we’re in the center of the ‘body’, the village hall. The reason why there are so many areas isn’t simply because the ‘body’ isn’t big enough to contain everyone, but also to avoid the risk of complete annihilation of the villagers in case of a cave-in.

The area indicated by the blinking red light is one of the separate areas, a residential space called the ‘right wing’. This is the place where Viscaria came to deliver supplies the previous day.

“Is it sealed off? What about the bypass routes?”

I ask, “No can do.” and the village head just rolls about as he answers.

“Leaving aside the route leading directly to the body, the bypass

route from the right foot is completely blocked off."

"Do we have contact with the right wing?"

"Cattleya just gave a report. We have some young who are injured, but everything's fine after some treatment."

"Really? Thank goodness…"

For the time being, I heave a sigh of relief.

"What was that about? Just a cave in?" Eisbahn grumbles, putting his legs on the table. "Hasn't those been happening recently? Can I go back now?"

"Hey, be serious."

"But it's troublesome."

"Don't you have a sense of responsibility?"

"I might consider if you spend a night together with me."

Eisbahn's bares his teeth, showing a glint as he waves his hand over his golden slick hair. This guy's hopeless.

"To help each other in times of difficulty…this is the teachings of our masters."

Götz notes with a serious look, "You're noisy, shut up." Eisbahn glares back.

"This is just me stating principles."

"Always yapping away non-stop, shut up already, you bastard."

Eisbahn's glares with his blue eyes, and Götz's silver mask gives a grim look. It's common for the hardboiled faction's Götz and the flirty faction's Eisbahn to clash.

“—Back on point!”

Chief hastily cuts off the conversation, attempting to get back on point. This strange forceful habit shows up all the time.

“Anyway, we need to make sure the cut-off routes are back to normal. If batteries and supplies are not provided, lives will be affected...Viscaria?”

“What is it...?”

Viscaria has been scratching her head, staring at the Birdmap the entire time.

“As the lead mechanic, what do you think of this?”

“I think...”

Viscaria answers while she continues looking, “I think we should try to attack the ‘bypass route’.”

“Huh? Isn’t the ‘direct route’ closer?”

I raise this question that naturally comes. The routes leading the ‘body’ and the ‘scattered areas’ are called the ‘direct routes’, the main routes leading to the village. Conversely, the paths linked everywhere are called ‘bypass routes’, narrow and only used for assistance.

“Of course I want to use the direct route...”

Viscaria operates the control panel by her hand, and swtiches the screen.

“As you can see, the direct route leading to the right wing is very close to the energy cables of the ‘Snow White’. If we have to remove the ice through explosions and melting them, we need to be thoroughly careful in consideration how it will affect the ‘Snow White’. In contrast—”

Viscaria again switches to another screen.

“On the other hand, there isn’t any facility around the bypass route between the ‘right foot’ and the ‘right leg’, so there’s no problems with any violent works. As the lead mechanic, I do recommend this option.”

“I see.”

I agree with her explanation, and summarizes everything. We can’t let the meeting drag on for too long.

“I agree with Viscaria’s proposal to repair the bypass route. We can leave the direct route repair for later…what do you think?”

“This side agrees.”

Götz nods. “I’d say that I agree.” Chief too.

“…Well, since Viscaria says so, I don’t mind.”

Eisbahn puts his legs down from the table, look unenthused as his neck lets out a creak.

“Then it’s decided!”

I stand up, and look around at everyone.

“We’ll be leaving in 30 minutes. Everyone, gather at the south east opening once you’re done with preparations! Don’t be late!”

We meet up, and get down to work immediately.

The people involved are Eisbahn, Götz, Viscaria and me. Chief’s in the village hall, preparing for any sudden scenarios.

“This is…”

Through the long tunnel, we arrive at the ‘right foot’, and at this moment, it has been an hour since we left.

Once we arrive at the scene, I am left taken aback. The operation

this time is to repair the bypass route between the ‘right foot’ and the ‘right wing’, but the collapse is worse than we expanded. The tunnel leading directly to the right wing has completely collapsed, and there are large chunks of ice blocking the entrance, so big that we have to look up.

“This is bad.”

Eisbahn mutters in shock, tapping at the massive ice blocks lying before us. We have not seen such a collapse in 10 years.

“This is where I show up.”

Metal arms Götz volunteers to work.

“Then get to work.”

Eisbahn waves his hand tauntingly.

“Hey, you too, get to work!”

“Tch—how troublesome.”

“Enough already. Hurry up!”

I immediately shove this unenthusiastic colleague of mine.

...Goodness sake.

“Eisbahn takes the right, Götz takes the left!”

“Alrighty.” “Roger then.”

Eisbahn and Götz face off against the large blocks of ice from left and right.

“All acts are impermanent. everything is everchanging.”

Götz lowers his body and raises his right arm. The arm, as thick as a lady’s waist, gives off a right light, and energy can be seen flowing.”

“Break!”

With a yell, Götz’s right fist slams into the ice block. Biki biki, web-like cracks spread on the ice block, and with a boom, the ice block shatters. This is Götz’s ‘iron arm’, the number one power in the village.

“Eisbahn, you too, get to work!”

“I get it already! ...Ahhh, this is tiring.”

He grumbles as he raises his right fist above his head, his fingers reaching out as they give off a blue light, and he swings his fist diagonally at the ice block. Then, there’s a light coming out from the ice block, as it slides apart, becoming two. This is the ‘Phantom Blade’ Eisbahn is so proud of, the sharpest weapon in the village.

Buun, the blue light again slices a few blocks of ice apart. There’s a rustling sound and a red light next to him , as the ice blocks start to fall. They aren’t on good terms, but it’s strange how they have a nice chemistry.

“Woah, these two are really amazing...!”

Viscaria exclaims,

“You’re the amazing one, Viscaria.”

“Eh?”

“Today’s operation, the repair of the three-wheel, the check up on the villagers. Aren’t they are done thanks to you? It’s because of you that we’re still living.”

I give my praise, and Viscaria suddenly panics and says, “Ah, I’m not that great...” she adjusts her beret, lowering it by a lot, and the face beneath it is slightly red. She’s second only to the Chief Chamomile in terms of age, but she really can’t put on a front. This is something I find endearing.

“It’s over!” “We’re done!”

The voices of the duo can be heard from the shattered pile of ice. It’s really amazing to see such massive ice blocks get shattered like that.

“Good work, you two! Now leave it to me!”

I get onto the icemobile, and start the engine. Now’s my time to work.

Once I’m sure everyone is on the cargo rack, I press a switch on the steering handle. With a click, the lights at the front wheels are lit. This is a ‘multi-purpose directional heat wave firing installation’—commonly known as the ‘little sun’, a unique machine that can fire high heat in a semi-spherical shape.

“Let’s go!”

I let the icemobile advance. 2km per hour, slower than walking speed.

So the shattered ice blocks are obstructing me. I maintain the original speed as I let the ‘little sun’ hit them, and with a whoosh, white steam comes out, as the massive blocks before me shrink as though they’re dropped in hot water. This little sun really is needed to melt the ice.

“Yep, this little sun is really convenient.”

Viscaria nods away in satisfaction.

“Okay, let’s get going! Hold on!”

I yell, and exert my grip on the handle.

With the dazzling ‘sun’, I proceed forward slowly. The ice blocks obstructing the tunnel evaporate with a fizzle once they touch the sun, and white steam fill our vision, so much that visibility is no more

than 3m.

“Ahh~hhaa, how boring.”

Less than 15 minutes through the tunnel, and Eisbahn is already complaining. He’s lying flat on the cargo rack behind the icemobile, looking really dejected.

“How long more?”

“Hm—3 hours?”

Viscaria responds tersely. “Tch—” Eisbahn voices out in annoyance.

“Can’t we go faster?”

“We can’t. There may be a second collapse if this happens.”

Viscaria coolly notes, and all Eisbahn can respond is, “I really can’t take this…”

“Hey, where are you touching?”

“Just some skinship.”

“Stop it.”

“Ow.”

Viscaria pinches hard at Eisbahn’s sticky hand that’s fondling her butt.

“Tch. Why are the Senator girls not cute at all?”

“Enough with the useless talk already.”

“And that’s why you can’t find a lover, Viscaria.”

“For me, machines are my lovers.”

Viscaria extends the feelers in her right hand out.

—Seriously, that idiot.

I keep on driving the icemobile, observing the cargo rack through the rear view mirror. Behind me is Viscaria, who's watching the surroundings quietly; Further back is Eisbahn, lying down straight. Götz's right at the back, completely quiet like a knight about to depart. This is a scenery that hasn't change in a hundred years.

"Nn, the landscape's low here. Slow down."

"Got it."

Following VIsercia's instructions, I lower the speed by 3 rotations. The speed is finally at 1km per hour, and we're moving really slowly.

Melting away the tunnel quickly is forbidden here. Given the capabilities of the little sun, we can open a path by melting the ice, even if we are moving just a little faster, but this might cause the roof, already loose due to the earthquake, to collapse on us.

"Just lower the output a little more. Yes yes, at this speed."

Viscaria continues to calculate and gives me instructions. At this point, she probably has numerous calculations going on in her head. Direction, sturdiness of the ice, output of the heat, speed of the icemobile. Nobody else can come up with some calculations.

Tremors reach my hands on the handle from time to time. The ice blocks that collapsed contain rubble of various sizes, so whenever I crash into an ice block, it'll cause a tremendous recoil on the hands holding the steering handle. I continue to steer the vehicle that's berserking like a crazy horse, moving at a constant speed.

And so, an hour passes.

"Wait!"

Viscaria yells, “What is it?” I pull the brake.

“—Pulse detected!”

“Eh!?”

“It’s coming!”

Right when Viscaria shouts out, a loud rumble trembles.

—An aftershock!

“Amaryllis!”

Someone calls for my name, and so—

The world is shattered.

“uu…”

My batteries are restarted. My consciousness is back.

—I…

Something large is pressing on my upper body. Is it collapsed ice, or is this the afterlife? No, there’s no afterlife for the dead— “You awake now, Milady?”

I open my eyes, and find a man’s face inches away from my nose.

“Kyaa…!”

I send the man flying away with a slam.

“Ouch!”

As I’m not controlling my output, the man really is sent flying away.

“You lowlife! Lecher! Shameless!”

“What’s with you? And I just saved you too…”

Eisbahn pats the back of his head that has collides, and slowly gets to his feet.

“Ah…”

I lift my head in surprise. A block of ice above me was about to crush me, and its surface is chopped off cleanly.

“Well, good that you’re okay.”

Eisbahn switches off the ‘Phantom Blade’ coming out from his right hand. The blue burner-like lights slowly shorten, and finally vanishes into the hand.

—Ah…

“Did you just save me…”

“Quite a late realization there.”

“Th-thank…”

“If you wanna, thank me with your body…owowow.”

“Don’t get greedy.”

I kick his naughty right hand that is reaching for my butt. I really wanted to convey my thanks to him, but seeing that gleeful face left me really disinterested.

“What about Viscaria and Götz…?”

“No need to worry. Look.”

Eisbahn points his thumb back. Opposite the toppled icemobile, I can see two figures.

“Ouch…”

Suddenly standing before me is Viscaria. Her iconic beret has fallen off, revealing short red hair.

“Lady Viscaria, may I inquire if you are fine?”

Reaching a hand out to her is a silver man. “Sorry about that.” Viscaria answers as she holds the hand.

“You may dispense with the thanks.”

—Thanks goodness. Everyone is okay.

I heave a sigh of relief. Without Götz and Eisbahn around, who knows what would have happened to us.

“Anyway.”

I look around, and mutter.

“Where is this place…?”

It’s a space I have never seen before.

It’s a large space that’s very warm, so warm one won’t think of it as being in ice. There’s a huge hole in the roof, and it seems the earthquake causes the ‘bottom’ of tunnel to fall off, and we end up falling into this space.

To deduce where we are, I pull out the Birdmap from my mind circuits.

—Eh? There’s no response?

Every villager has a signaller installed in their bodies, just in case, and it’ll be indicated on the Birdmap in the form of a red light, but I can’t see anything.

—What’s going on? There shouldn’t be a place in the village where the radio waves can’t reach…

“Wah!”

Suddenly, an excited squeal can be heard.

I see that it’s from Viscaria. She’s looking around the room, “Amazing! Amazing! So this is the Full Mobile?” “Is this the Poly Screen?” squealing away.

“What’s the matter?”

I leap over a collapsed block of ice, and arrive at her side.

—Eh, what is this…!?

“Amazing…!”

Like Viscaria, I too let out an impressed cry.

Rows of massive containers are stacked like dominos in the innermost section of the room. At the side of the storage are sofas lined out in a single file.

“Is this…!?”

I look to my side, “Yeah.” And Viscaria nods away.

“No doubts about this. This is ‘Masters’ room.”

Having a brief look of it, it’s about 20 square meters. We never discovered such a large space near the village.

—This is really amazing…

I walk in the room, overwhelmed by this scene. Every day, I can see the ‘Snow White’ our masters sleep in, but it has been more than a hundred years since I’ve seen a space humans live in. The books our masters read, the water our masters drink, the sofas our masters sit on— “Ahh, masters…”

I’m so touched to a point of being speechless, and can only let out a

sigh.

Everyone present is moved. Even Götz, who's as unflappable as they come, is going "We have a new discovery." "A grand discovery it is.". Viscaria in turn is staring at one item after another. Eisbahn, who likes to lean by the side, "Amazing, really amazing…" has been looking around like a child. We have forgotten the fact that we have fallen in here, thoroughly mesmerized by this strange room.

"Hey, have a look!"

Suddenly, Eisbahn shouted.

"What is this?"

"Damnnn!"

He picks up a multi-purpose terminal, and on that screen, it's showing a video.

It's a naked woman. She's twisting her waist in a sexy manner, looking very lewd.

"Kyaa!! Wh-what is this!?"

"What do you mean? An ero book, ero book."

"Th-th-throw it away! Right now!"

"But this is our masters' belongings."

Saying that, Eisbahn switches through the as though he's reading a book. And so, the woman's getting more intense—woah, eh, this, she's naked, hugging, like this— "So this is the ero book they talk of…it's the first time I'm seeing such a thing."



Eisbahn's eyes are glittering, like a child who just came across a new toy.

"Look at this Götz. This is really amazing."

"You have been talking about lewd all this while...uu."

Götz's eyes are practically glued to the screen. "This is too unbecoming." He mutters as he keeps flipping the pages. The naked images of young women appear one after another.

"Hey, what are you doing here, Götz!?"

"No, simply trying to investigate what is inside. Erm, I absolutely have no interest in lewds—"

"I'm confiscating this!"

I snatch the terminal from Götz's hands, and in the process, the naked lady lets out a sexy groan. I hurriedly switch it off.

"Götz is still a man after all..."

With a strangely impressed tone, Viscaria returns from deep inside the room.

Her hands are holding a replay video of two naked men embracing each other.

After a while.

"What is this...?"

I continue searching, and find a really amazing scenery in a corner of the room. Over there, a massive monitor occupies the entire wall, and there's a robot seated before it. It seems the robot has used up all its energy as it collapses on the table.

"Everyone, come here!"

I call through the wireless, and the other three come over. Upon seeing the robot slumped before the monitor, “Who is this?” “Never seen this face before.” The men frown.

“It’s a goner” Viscaria shuts the chest of the robot, and shrugs, “Thoroughly ‘dead’. The mind circuits have been wrecked for 30 years.”

“30 years…so it has been alive for the first 70 years?”

“Yes.”

“What’s it doing all this time…”

There are numerous panels before the robot, but all of them are cut off. Viscaria tries to repair them, but the situation is so dire that it will take a long time.

Eisbahn mutters,

“It’s like a control room.”

After this, we find a rope and ladder inside, and manage to escape safely. We thought it would be difficult to escape, and we’re really lucky that it’s so easy.

Personally, I still want to investigate that space, so I do have some regrets. However, the repairs to the bypass route is of utmost importance, and we can’t delay it.

I quietly make up my mind to revisit this place, and get onto the tribmobile.

At this moment.

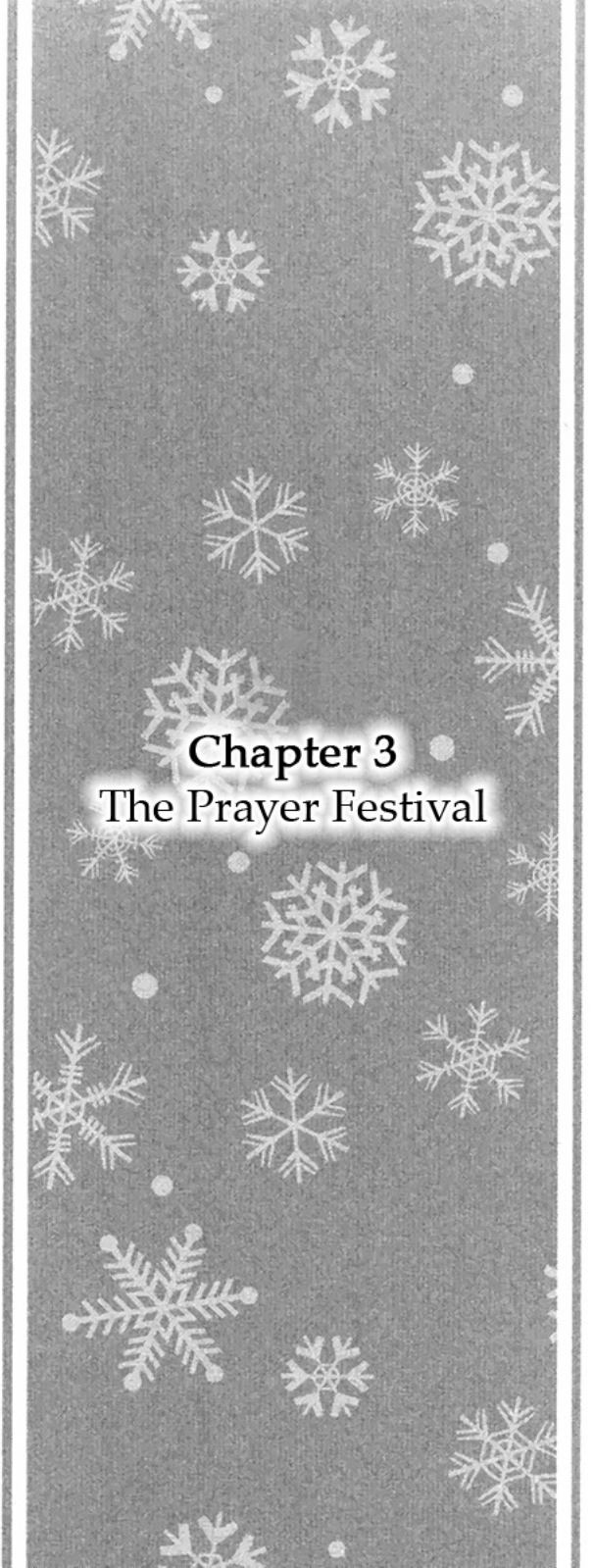
—Hm?

Suddenly, I sense a gaze. Someone seems to be staring here.

—Who is it…?

I quickly turn my head around.

But there is no one inside the room.



Chapter 3
The Prayer Festival

Chapter 3 – The Prayer Festival

Eight people are lightly wounded, no casualties.

Luckily, the damages are a lot more minor than expected. The direst of the disaster is the direct route that has collapsed, but it's completely repaired on the second day, and three days later, the rubble is all cleared up.

We decided to keep this 'mysterious room' we found during the repairs from the villagers. This decision is made by the Chief. He feels it is better to investigate first before revealing.

And on the fifth day after the earthquake.

"Vicia! Vicia Toxin!"

I, dressed in a nurse outfit, call out in the corridor. The waiting room filled with the ruckus from the children immediately quiet down, and a girl teeters towards me, "Your name is?"

"Registration number 00218, Vicia Toxin."

The girl straightens her little back, stating her name.

"Not bad. You did good, Vicia."

I pat Vicia's head, "ehehe" and she grins gleefully.

"Teacher, Teacher Viscaria!"

"Please wait~"

Splash. There's the sound of hands being washed, and Viscaria, dressed in white clothes, show up.

"Kept you wait…eh, Vicia? What's wrong?"

“Erm.”

Vicia puts her hands on her tummy, looking up as she complains, “I feel some pain.”

“Oh dear…so, what kind of pain?”

“Feels like the screws are creaking.”

“I see.”

Viscaria nods away, moving her feelers.

“Now then, lie down here.”

“Are you going to open my tummy?”

Vicia lies on the bed, giving an uneasy look. “It’s okay.” Viscaria gives a tender look at the girl’s face.

“It won’t hurt at all. It’ll be done immediately.”

“Really?”

“Really.”

Viscaria comforts the girl who still remains somewhat uneasy, giving a motherly smile.

“Okay now, if you’re a good kid, switch off your ‘Mind Circuit’.”

“Yes.”

“And your Control Circuit too.”

“Yes.”

To note, there are three main circuits in a robot. The ‘Mind Circuit’ is basically the human brain, which acts as the control tower for the entire body. The ‘Control Circuit’ is basically the equivalent of the

nerves and spine, able to spread the commands from the Mind Circuit all over the body. And then, there is the 'Safety Circuit' to prevent both Circuits from going amok.

"Teacher…ple…ase…"

Vicia's voice becomes interrupted, and finally, the light in her eyes vanish. Once Viscaria is sure that her Mind Circuit is in sleep mode, she starts to investigate.

"Let's see…"

She rolls up the girl's shirt with her metal feeler, revealing the white belly, and gently inserts into that cute bellybutton. A little twist, and with a little creak, Vicia's abdomen is opened right down the middle.

"Hm, uh huh."

Viscaria checks the girl's body with a serious look. The feeler extending from her fingertip twitches like a living creature, peeling off a translucent membrane, revealing the inner circuits.

"Ahh, so it's this thing after all…"

"This, as in?"

I look over Viscaria's back, and towards Vicias,

"An 'inflammation' around the batteries."

She says, lighting a light from the tip of her feeler. It's somewhere to the inner side of Viscaria's belly, as the battery unit has been distorted like melted plastic.

"Another change?"

"Yes. The same part as the last one. But,"

"What?"

“The belly may still hurt even after it is replaced…”

The deeply entrenched growth ring-like frown appears on Viscaria’s forehead, “Specification is HRM1103. Type is 01102C.”

“Hold on.”

I head into the room, and look up at the parts cases that are stacked everywhere and built to the ceiling. The replacement parts for the villagers’ bodies are filled completely. In terms of importance to the village, this warehouse is second only to the Snow White.

“HRM1103. 01102C.”

I recite it out loud, and one of the shelves light up. A faint translucent blue drawer slides out automatically, indicating that what I’m looking for exists. I draw out a silver baumkuchen-like part, and return to the diagnosis room.

“This is okay, right?”

“Okay. Then discard that old one.”

I look at the part by the bed that is completely deformed. This is the ‘infected part’ taken out from Viscaria’s body. It’s so twisted that it is impossible to think of it as the same part. It’s basically telling the pain the girl suffered, and my heart aches.

After Vicia’s operation is done, we proceed to diagnose another ten or so, and the morning work is finally done.

“There’s a lot of people today…”

Viscaria slumps into the sofa, letting her neck creak. Waste materials will gather in the Mind Circuit of the robots keep focusing their attentions too much, corroding it.

“You alright? You’ve been working non-stop recently.”

“No way. I feel better off than you having to drive the icemobile for

more than 100 hours a week."

"Don't force yourself."

Viscaria is basically the expert in technology, so we just end up leaving everything to her. We can probably install her repair manual in us like a pill, but we probably will freeze up due to a lack of specs.

"Spare Ops is probably at its limits..."

Over the past hundred years, we have been providing maintenance and care for the 'Snow White', for the 'Spindle' of the main computer, the 'cradle' of the masters, and the 'REM forest' that contains the Snow White—every day, we made checks, cleaning and repairs on them. But no matter how well we manage to maintain them, the 'Snow White' is still a large piece of metal. Its body is slowly being corroded, breaking down. And so, on a certain day seventy years after we went underground, the spare parts to repair the Snow White have finally worn out.

We didn't know what to do. If this kept up, the Snow White would malfunction. Our beloved masters would die. Is there any way to obtain the parts—after thinking so hard, we finally thought of one.

To extract.

We extracted the parts that form a robot's body, refined them, and used them on the Snow White, so that the maintenance of the Snow White could continue. In this sealed underground world, where resources are limited, there was no other choice.

But there was undoubtedly an issue to this. Robots that had been 'extracted' would be unable to move due to the defects of their parts. To resolve this issue, we used 'replacement parts' made of similar materials to replace the parts that were 'extracted'. The villagers' bodies were then replaced by replacement parts every passing day.

—And once everything is switched to replacement parts.

Viscaria once explained this to us.

—They aren't parts of official specifications, so no matter how we try to process them, they will not mesh perfectly, and the rate of deterioration will be hastened. Thus, patients who have been 'extracted' will malfunction easily.

Even so, the villagers rushed forth, hoping to be 'extracted'. I too have seventeen parts swapped with 'replacement parts', two on the head, two on the right hand, three on the left hand, one on the right leg, two on the left leg, and seven on the body. At first, the ones who offered to be extracted was limited to just adults, and in the end, even the little children bravely offer their parts. At this point, a child has an average of 4.2 parts extracted, while an adult has an average of 11.3 parts.

Pin pon pan pon. The cowbell-like chime rings, indicating the end of the rest period.

"Now it, it's time."

Viscaria gets up from the sofa, and adjusts the collar of her white robe.

"Amaryllis, what's our appointment for the afternoon?"

"Eh, three cases starting at 1pm, four cases starting at two, and then—"

At that moment,

"Wait, what are you saying!?"

A young girl's voice rings.

"I-I-I-I-I won't go to a hospital."

"Are you an idiot!? Stop forcing yourself here, trashy!"

"I-I hate the, hospital. Hate it, hate it."

And then, it's followed by a familiar "Gaaa peee." Noise. Viscaria and I exchange looks.

"Emergency patient first."

Viscaria lowers her beret, and shrugs.

After that, another two weeks pass.

The lights shine upon the ice-carved stage, creating a dazzling crystal effect. The center of the arena is filled with a scattered-style audience seating, as the three hundred plus villagers are all gathered here.

The prayer festival we awaited is finally here. The passion brimming from the audience reaches the stage, as though trying to melt it. The festival is going to be held from morning to night, and all work is suspended. I too intend to enjoy the festival before it's my turn to ascend the stage.

But,

"Why are you sitting beside me?"

"It's fine. Don't be so rigid."

"Seating's in order of performance. This is the Chief's seat."

"I got the old man's permission."

"Ugh…Chief…"

This rare relaxation time I finally have is ruined by this flirting guy. "Hey, stop touching me." "Ehehe." So this exchange continue on over and over again, and in the blink of an eye, it's time for the performance.

Ta—talatatatata tattala♪

A sextet happily blow the trumpets "Kept us waiting!" "It's here!"

“Heerrrreee!” and the audience roar into life. There are shrieks in this fiery atmosphere.

“And now, the 108th Masters’ Revival Prayer Ceremony shall begin.”

With a beautiful voice, the host Cattleya announces the start of the festival, and the audience burst into cheers again.

“Greetings from the Chief.”

And amidst the thunderous applause, Chief Chamomile shows up on the stage. The way his head rolls around on the stage is as terrifying as a zombie in a horror flick.

“This is the Chief Chamomile speaking!!”

He repeats the greeting that remains the same for over a hundred year, “Chief!!” “You still doing okay!?” “So cute!!” and voices can be heard from the audience.

“As you all know, this Revival Prayer Festival is for a ritual to let our beloved masters sleep well, and that one day, they will revive. In other words—”

The Prayer Festival is a traditional festivity with a hundred years of history. At first, it’s simply a yearly ritual to offer ‘prayers’ to our Masters, but as time passes, there is singing, dancing and all kinds of entertainment involved. In this sense, while it is to provide entertainment for the villagers who have lived underground for a long time, the main purpose is to train their ‘talents’ such that the acts can be performed to the masters once they awake. The programs are graded according to voting, and the basis of the voting is decided on “Can it make our masters happy”.

“In other words, this Prayer Festival isn’t just for entertainment, but also an exalted purpose to be honed for our masters—”

And about thirty minutes into the Chief’s speech, “It’s too long!”

“Enough already!” “Get down now!” an endless amount of boos ring. This too happen every year, and the Chief, who always appears in the midst of thunderous applause, will sheepishly slip off the stage amidst boos. “Don’t throw any items!” “This includes screws!” Cattleya, in charge of managing the scene, will holler, Once the Chief’s address is done, the staff will clean up the screw and screwcaps on the stage (these will be returned to their masters once done), and then, a trumpet’s cry signals the start again.

—It’s finally here.

“Entry number 1! Please welcome Miss Ceolaria and Mr Curl!” (Ceolaria, short for Calceolaria, Curl, short for Ivory Curl) As Cattleya’s beautiful voice rings, a man and woman appear on stage.

One of them is Miss Ceolaria, who has the appearance of an eighty-year-old domestic robot. She’s the ‘replacement robot’ created by a husband who lost his wife and wanted to alleviate his loneliness, and she continues to live even after her master died. The other, Mr Curl, once worked in a famous orchestra, and is now the premier musician in the village.

“I’m really nervous to be chosen first. Now then, I shall perform the ‘Spearmint Genesis’ my deceased husband loved.

Miss Ceolaria bows elegantly, and the crowd immediately burst into applause before becoming silent again. There’s no commotion, as everyone knows that it’s time to be silent. As her partner, Mr Curl carries his signature electronic viola, and stands diagonally behind her.

The uninterrupted melody of the viola flows out, and Miss Ceolaria starts to sing.

Before humans are born, in a time far beyond.

The many messengers of god, appear in the sky.

With tears in eyes, they became rain of grace.

Thus the seas are born, the seas are born.

With a clear yet despondent voice, she sings a hymn that reveals how the world is born The arena is engulfed in a solemn atmosphere, and everyone feels melancholic, gloomy. Miss Ceolaria's program has never changed over the past thirty years, but whenever I listen to it, it just feels so new, the first time I have heard it.

"...So it ends. Thank you all for listening."

Once the singing and performance are over, a thunderous applause rain upon the stage again. Both of them bow, and return to the side of the stage.

—This is a nice song..

As I narrow my eyes and enjoy the lingering emotions, Cattleya's voice rings again.

"Continuing on, Entry Number Two! It's little Vicia and Grayano[1] performing a magic show!"

The performances continue on.

Pairs of male and female perform songs, dramas, skits, magic shows, manzais, impressions—there are classic shows we are familiar with, and new shows; the atmosphere at the arena remains as lively as ever. I remain in the audience, cheering from time to time, and squashing Eisbahn's lecherous hands from time to time.

It has been two hours since the performance started.

"Continuing on, entry number twenty five, little Daisy and Gappy's 'Horsey Play'."

—Oh, it's here.

I lean my body towards the stage. The backdrop changes into a grassy field similar to a kindergarten, and Daisy shows up, riding on

Gappy. “Ahahha!” “It’s Gappy!” “It’s Scrappy Gappy!” and the children burst out laughing.

“I-I-I-I’m not Scrappy, at all.”

“Enough already, shut up.”

Daisy slaps Gappy on the head, and it causes the audience to laugh again.

“Now then, let’s go!”

“G-got it!”

Daisy rides on Gappy, who looks like he’s going to collapse at any given moment, and kicks his chest. Gappy slowly moves forward in a clumsy manner, the caterpillar legs letting out a creaking sound.

“Alright, now we’re going with the one great jump in history!”

The host Cattleya announces, and a ‘wall’ carved out of ice is moved onto the stage.

“Hey, wait.”

“What?”

I whisper to Eisbahn beside me,

“Jump...as in they’re going to jump up that wall?”

“Most likely.”

On first glance, the wall is at least three times the height of Daisy. It’s really unbelieve to think that she would be able to jump across while riding Gappy.

—Definitely impossible.

The audience too break out in murmurs. “Jump over that thing?”

“You’re kidding, right?” “No can do.” There was such a discussion.

But Daisy herself gives a confident look, and has Gappy retreat. It probably looks like a running start before they jump.

“It’s too dangerous after all.”

I stand up. If they end up crashing into the wall, there’ll be trouble.

“Well, just wait.”

The flirting guy beside me grab my arm, “Hey, let go already.” I glare at him.

“They got an idea.”

“Eh?”

“Look at that.”

Eisbahn points at the stage.

“Isn’t there a sheet before the wall? There’s probably a jumping platform underneath.”

“How do you know?”

“There’s a similar trick.”

Well, it’s true that there’s something thin laid out somewhere on the grassy patch.

“So they’ll be able to jump over the wall?”

“Should be.”

I then sit down again. If Eisbahn’s right, I would have ruined this program if I went out.

The crowd is bustling. I narrow my eyes, and see that the running

start has begun. Gappy's caterpillar legs spin intensely as the sound of friction echoes, and sparks look ready to fly as they charge towards the wall. What will happen, how will this end up—with bated breath, everyone watches this reckless challenge, and at the moment they're about to crash into the wall—Gappy's body sinks, and the rebound causes them to jump up.

—Ah!

It's supposed to be a jump several meters high. Unfortunately, both of them lose their balance and end up 'flying forward', falling head first into the bottom of the stage like a rubber ball, thunk, thud, loud noises follow.

"Daisy! Gappy!" I instinctively get to my feet and quickly rush to the stage. "You alright...!?"

I pick up Gappy, who remains motionless, "Ga-Ga-Gappy..." he groans weakly, the hemispherical head sinking in hard.

At that moment.

"You idiot...!"

A roar.

"Just a little more...Gappy you idiot! Garbage! Trashy!!"

I find Daisy beside me looking utterly furious, her face flushed. It seems she's lightly hurt herself.



“I-I-I-I-I!”

Gappy tries to refute as he remains in my arms.

“I-I’m not, trashy.”

“Shut up trashy! We trained together so many times! It’s all your fault that we failed!”

“I-I-I-I-I-I di-did my best…it’s your fault, Daisy!”

“What did you say…!?”

Daisy widens her eyes, her body shaking in anger.

And then, she yells,

“I hate you, Gappy…!!”

After that, the girl runs off without looking back.

Even after the break, Daisy shows no signs of returning.

—Goodness…

I want to go look for her, but I can’t ignore Gappy who’s giving off smoke. So I bring Gappy to the infirmary.

“This is really some injury.” Viscaria slowly notes once she sees Gappy.

“Well, you can leave the rest to me. Just head back to the festival.”

“But.”

“It looks like it’s just a dent on the outside. No need to worry about this.”

“Hm…but I want to stay here until the repairs are done.”

And so, Gappy's repair ends up taking up more than two hours, and I stay by his side the entire time.

Daisy's stubbornness really is troublesome…I mutter as I leave the infirmary, as the morning performances are coming to an end. It's almost my turn, so I quickly hurry to the seat.

"Sure took you long enough."

Eisbahn gives me a gleeful look, his legs resting on the seat before him.

And I show no attempt to hide my contempt as I sit with a thud.

"Goodness. Got to tell her off this time."

"Oh my, you're angry."

"They argued on the stage of the Prayer Festival. How disrespectful to our masters."

"Maybe it's more interesting if they had argued right from the beginning?"

"You idiot."

I proceed to knock the blond on the head.

At this moment.

"Now then, entry number fifty five! Miss Amaryllis and Mr Eisbahn will present…eh?"

Cattleya stares at the paper in her hand, taken aback.

"A deep kiss!"

And so I'm stunned.

"Wh-wh-wh-wh-wh-wh-what is this!?"

“Uhehehehehehe as you heard!”

I grab him by the chest, and shake him head.

“I didn’t hear of this!”

“Didn’t I say it already?” Eisbahn answers with a grin. “I got the old man’s permission!”

—Ah!

I recall the words Eisbahn said when he sat next to me. He did say he has a deal with the Chief.

“I thought it was about the seating…”

“What? You want to forfeit…?”

“Ugh…you had me there…”

Cornered, I glare at this flirt before me. “Call me a strategist.” He chuckles.

“I’m not going to do it. A-a deep…deep kiss.”

“Is this your first time?”

“Shut up…!”

I smack this pervert on the head. “Miss Amaryllis! Mr Eisbahn! It’s time!” Cattelya exclaims.

“Uu…”

It’s bad. If this keeps up, I’ll be disqualified. This prayer festival happens once a year, and if I get disqualified without being able to do anything, I can’t explain to our masters. But if I have to give this fellow a deep kiss…!

While I’m feeling troubled, “Well then.” He raises his eyebrows.

“How about we sing?”

“Eh?”

“A duet with me. Stand on the stage and sing. This should be fine, right?”

“This…”

It’s a lot better than kissing, but.

“Anyway, do you know how to sing? I’m going to sing—”

“‘Good Night, Dear Masters’.”

—!

I gasp.

“Hehehe.”

Eisbahn smiles confidently, and gives me a nudge from behind.

“It’s decided.”

I just feel that I fell into a trap, or so it seems.

So dazzling.

The white light shining down the artificial crystalized stage swallows the entire stage, giving the impression of it being under the sun. The stares of the audience are like sharp arrows piercing through my heart, and I can’t help but freeze up as I’m nervous.

“What? Nervous?”

“No-not at all.”

I open my lips slightly, making sure my voice isn’t obvious trembling. To be honest, I really feel uneasy about the sudden change

of partner. This Festival only occurs once a year. If I fail, I won't have the chance to salvage it until the next year.

"Can't you just play this automatically?"

"Nope. This live performance has to be in real time."

"You're right."

He shows no tension at all, and my heart has a strange feeling, wondering if I should hate him or hate.

The music echoes on the stage, and we're surrounded by the sad melody of the instruments. The duet is finally going to begin.

—Three, two, one...!

Sleep well, sleep well, sleep well for today.

I put my hand before my chest, holding in my tension as I sing. And shockingly, Eisbahn's voice echoes perfectly with mine.

—Eh...?

I shall continue to hold you in my arms, so sleep well.

One day, even if this country, is wiped out, the morning light, The singing continues, and I can't help but show surprise at the partner next to me. It's a powerful voice, audible enough, a singing style that perfectly controls the essential points of a man's voice.

—Th-this is brilliant...!

Everything, and anything, is for, you.

That is why, sleep well, for today.

Until, the day, you wake up again.

It's like driving the icemobile in unison, as our singing continues in

flawless rhythm. This song is adapted from the original lullaby for this performance, and it's only the first time I perform it before others. However, he's able to just sing as though he's a long-term partner, and even I enjoy singing before I enter the sub-chorus.

Finally, the climax.

Now, the light shall shine on me.

The dazzling future, shall descend upon these hands.

The world belongs to you, the future too belongs to you.

And you belong to me.

To me, the one who loves you.

The song ends. The audience replies with silence.

And then,

At that moment, the cheers rain down like a torrent on us, as the audience get to their feet. This is a standing ovation.

—Amazing…

I did receive applause during the past Prayer Festivals, but this time, it's exceptional. We're basked in massive thunderous applause "Amazing!" "Riveting" with loud cheers, so loud that the ice ceilings appear to crack. Even when I had the special prize of the Prayer Festival sixteen years ago, I never had such a huge reaction.

My circuits are heating.

—But when did he memorize this song?

I look at his face. Eisbahn keeps sending kisses to the crowd. At this moment, I recall his words, —It's a nice tune no matter how many times I hear it.

I see. I recall. I recall myself singing the lullaby in the 'Snow White', and him watching on.

—So that's when he remembered.

"See, didn't it go well?"

Eisbahn grins with glee, like a boy who succeeded with a prank.

My heart flutters.

The 'Grand Prix' this year goes to the Amaryllis and Eisbahn pair!"

And as the award is given, there is thunderous applause in the arena.

"Congratulations, Amaryllis!" "As expected!" "Good work, big sis!"

Still reeling from it, I receive the award for two on the stage. This is the first time I have won this title, and I never dreamed that I would be winning it with Eisbahn. I probably wouldn't be able to do it alone, so I think as I can't help but feel gracious towards Eisbahn. 'I'm too tired' however, he didn't attend the award ceremony because of that reason, and it's a pity that I couldn't share the joy with him. I'll hand him the prize later.

The special award goes to the 'Spearmint Genesis' by the Ceolaria pair, the hard work pair goes to Vicia's pair, and the 'booby prize' for the second worst act went to Daisy and Gappy. Daisy never returned ever since she left the arena in a huff, and Gappy's still in the infirmary. It's rare for both parties to not show up at the ceremony.

And so, the Prayer Festival this year comes to an end. To me, this is undoubtedly more impressionable than any Festival in the past. Having won the 'Grand Prix', I can finally sing to the masters with my head held high—so I think.

That night, I keep singing before the Snow White due to extreme delight. The Cradle our masters sleep in give off a little glint as it hears

my singing.

And so, this becomes the final Prayer Festival.

Chapter 4
Broken Toy

Chapter 4 – Broken Toy

An endless darkness swallows the entire village, and loneliness rule the place until dawn breaks.

There's no distinction of day and night in this underground world where the light can't shine. Despite this, the villagers decided that eight hours each day is to be designated as 'night', and during this time, everyone will switch to sleep mode, and save power. The lighting of the roof will be dimmed to the minimum, and one can't see without adjusting the visual output.

It's a week after the Prayer Festival.

—I'm finally done...

After issuing the 'supplies' for the day, I return to the village, and hurry home. Because of my duties as vice-chief, my house is right next to the senate hall.

And five minutes away from my hourse.

—Huh?

I find someone in the park at night. The hemispherical head seem familiar.

"Gappy?"

I ask, and a creaking sound can be heard. The shadow slowly turns towards me as the caterpillar legs let out a grinding sound.

"Ama...ry, llis?"

"What are you doing here late at night?"

"P-..."

The round lens visual installation he has seem harder to see than usual, probably because the surroundings are dark.

“P-p-pa-pa-park, is where, we play, rig-right?”

“Yes.”

“So-so-so, I-I came to, play.”

“So late at night…?”

I ask, and Gappy nods.

—Ah, I see.

I realize.

“Here’s here for Daisy, right?”

“Uu…”

Gappy remains speechless. It’s easy to read this child.

It has been a week since the Prayer Festival, but Gappy and Daisy have not made amends. Normally, they would be able to make amends in one night, but it has been a first time this lasted so long.

“Daisy really likes this park.”

“D-Daisy, really, loves the park.”

“She loves to ride on the swing.”

“D-Daisy’s good with the swing. She goes faster, higher than anyone, else.”

While talking about Daisy, Gappy continues to rattle on like usual.

I listen to his rambling for just a little more. We are the only two people in the park, and to any bystander, it might look like a

moonlight date.

"...The flower medal."

Gappy mutters,

"Eh...?"

"Daisy, wants, the flower medal."

"Flower medal...the Festival?"

I take down a flower medal from my chest. This is the commemorative medal only the prize winners of the Festival can get. It's made from the ice plants in the 'REM forest'. The medal has the flowers that had bloomed a hundred years ago.

"Daisy, never won, the medal, once. Of the children, the only ones, who never won, are Daisy, and me...so I really, wanted the medal. I thought that this year, just this year."

"I see..."

After the Prayer Festival last year, the only children who didn't win a prize were Daisy and Gappy. Leaving aside Gappy, there was no way Daisy the sore loser would take this.

"I-I-I-I-I—"

Gappy starts to be exceptionally loud.

"I want to give this medal, to Daisy."

He says adamantly, as though making an oath.

"As thanks, for playing, with, a broken, toy."

"I see..."

I kneel down, and exchange looks with Gappy. The fog at night

condenses, dampening his round lenses.

“But it’s late already, so head home now…okay?”

I pat his head, and he nods.

Something resembling a tear slides down the lens.

There are no starry skies in the underground world.

However, the crystals that fill the ceiling will flicker from time to time, and they appear to resemble twinkling stars.

I watch Gappy return home, and sit on the swing as I look up at the starry sky. What he said appear in my mind again.

—As thanks, for playing, with, a broken, toy.

A long time ago, Gappy’s a toy. HGP.10β, an outdoor toy robot suitable for play with children aged above three years old. Play hide-and-seek with children, play ball, play horsey—over the thirty years since he was created, he had been playing around at the roof of a department stores. He would run around while carrying children, or act as a ghost and give chase after them.

But, just as broken toys will be abandoned, the aged Gappy had a day where he would be decommissions. On a certain day thirty years after he was created, he was removed from the roof of the convenience store as he malfunctioned. After that, he was installed at the door of a second-hand shop, and then bought off in a strange net auction. It’s a mere coincidence that he came to village; when ‘the end’ came a hundred years ago, he was abandoned near the village, in an illegal dump.

Even after coming to this village, Gappy remains in poor condition. A little rigorous action, and it’ll be giving off smoke “Ga-ppy’, short-circuiting. Thus, whenever he plays with the children in the village, he’s often left aside. By the time he realizes it, he’s alone.

However, even he manages to gain respite.

“That face of yours is really frustrating.”

And talking to him, or trying to pick a fight, is a girl with soft chestnut-colored hair—Daisy Stalk. “Well, looks like I got no chance but to play with you. Be honored!” With such an arrogant attitude, the girl and Gappy become friends.

“Ah…”

At this moment, I realize.

There’s a shadow near the entrance of the park. It seem to look around the inside for something, and then retreat into the darkness.

“Daisy…?”

I call out, and the figure shivers in shock.

“Don’t be scared. It’s me.”

I call out, slightly louder this time, “Ama…ryllis?” and the girl whispers back.

“Come here.”

I wave at her from the swing. She’s somewhat hesitant, but she finally enters the park.

“So it’s you.”

“So…as in what?”

Daisy looks at me through her fluffy hair.

“Gappy just came by, so I was wondering if you would come by.”

“Gappy, came here…?”

The girl asks with her head lowered.

“Just now…do I call him?”

I put my finger on my temple. It’s a gesture to connect a wireless network.

“No, it’s fine.”

Daisy shakes her head lightly, and sits on the swing next to mine.

After that, there’s silence.

Krrr, krrr, there’s the sound of the swing’s cahins echoing emptily in the part at night. It seems to be a reflection of the girl, and I too feel a little forlorn.

“…Hey.”

As though muttering to herself, Daisy breaks the silence.

“Why did he come here?”

I answer, and Daisy immediately lifts her head, only to drop it again.

“…I see.”

“Not going to make amends?”

I ask, and Daisy remains silent. However, the swing gets a little higher.

Daisy and Gappy never spoke ever since the Prayer Festival. They met a few times at the park, but every time, Daisy would hurry back. The clumsy Gappy wanted to give chase after the girl, but never once was he able to catch up.

“—Actually.” The girl mutters. “Gappy’s not wrong.”

"..."

I listen silently.

"It's my fault for not checking the jumping platform during the festival."

"...I see."

"But when we failed, I really was angry, so I..."

At this point, Daisy curled her lips together. The darkness of the night is reflected in her large eyes, and the color as deep as the sea appear to be brimming out.

"...Time to go back."

After some silence, Daisy silently gets to her feet.

"Hm, it's late."

I do not intend to stop her. I know that even if I don't do anything, both of them will make amends.

—This time, it has been dragged out, but they'll definitely make amends. They're friends, irreplaceable bosom friends.

And after watching the girl limp away, I leave the park. I intend to head home, as it's too late.

—Next Prayer Festival, Daisy and Gappy will perform together again, right?

While having such thoughts, I walk home in the night. Right when I'm about to reach home.

"—Amaryllis."

I receive a wireless transmission.

“Hey, if you’re going to do anything strange to me, I’m not going to forgive you.”

“Don’t say that. Just watch.”

“Hey, I said not to touch anywhere strange.”

I pinch the itchy hand of his. “Ow!” and he yells in much exaggerated pain.

“So…”

I look up at him,

“W-what’s this important thing…now?’

The one who called me out through the emergency wireless communicator is Eisbahn.

—It’s something important. Please come by.

Normally, I wouldn’t be fooled by his sweet talk. But ever since the ‘duet’ during that Prayer Festival, my stance towards him isn’t as hard as before.

“It’s this, this.”

He picks up something with his finger. It’s a microchip the size of a little finger nail.

“…A high end memory chip?”

“Yeah. Some valuable data inside. I want to watch it with you.”

“…”

“What is it?”

“Ah, no, it’s nothing.”

I feel a little distraught, listless for a while. I am not hoping for something, but what's he planning, asking a young maiden out to 'watch an interesting video' together. I'm not a child anymore. No, I didn't have any hopes.

"Now then, put it into the replay set."

"Wait. Isn't this our masters'...!?"

Eisbahn slowly pulls out something. It's the Poly Screen I saw before.

"Did you bring it out!?"

"Just a little while and nobody will no."

"You idiot. We can't do this. Chief forbid us from going to that place."

With regards to that room we found three weeks ago—the 'Secret Room', Chief's orders are that no uninvolved people are to enter. 'We'll investigate this a little more', it's because of this reason that we have yet to disclose its existence to the ordinary people.

"Hehe, the more you say no, the more I want to."

"No means no...anyway, this thing."

I stare at the microchip.

"Is this the one with the perverted images?"

"There'll be a strip model resembling you showing up."

"Are your Mind Circuits rotten or something?"

I stamp on Eisbahn's foot "I'm going back!", and storm off. I really am an idiot to be hoping for any romantic works.

"Hey, wait! I'm joking, joking!" He hastily grabs my shoulder, "I

haven't watched the content! Anyway, you'll regret not watching it! It contains our masters' secret!"

"...Really?"

I stop in my tracks, and turn around.

"...R-right."

"Then why are you looking away?"

"Ah, you see." He shows the microchip. "I took this from the 'top secret' cabinet', so it definitely contains that."

"Not some top secret lewd video?"

"It's possible."

"I'm going back."

"Wait wait wait Amaryllis!"

With a cheesy voice, he calls out to me.

"It's because of me that you manage to win the 'Grand Prix' at the festival, right?"

"Uuu..."

Faced with his words, I falter a little.

"I didn't see what's inside This microchip has some strange additional encryption. It's not too late to go back if it's some lewds, so please. Okay, okay?"

"Hmm...really?"

"Really really."

"...Got it."

To be honest, I really am interested in the content of the chip. There's also the 'top secret' part on it, which piques my curiosity further.

"But we have to decrypt it, right?"

"Got to ask Viscaria."

"I see, only Viscaria can do…eh?"

I look at him, "…hm? Where are you looking?" Eisbahn grins away.

"I say, did you call me out…just to call Viscaria out?"

"Well, if I ask her directly, there's no way Viscaria will come out, right? But if it's you, it's a different matter."

"…I'm just a sideshow, right?"

I glare at him, utterly peeved as I am today.

"Hehehe, I'm quite the smart one…oof!"

I punch the face of the blond, and yell,

"I'm going back after all!"

"I see. This is a tough encryption to deal with…"

Viscaria stares at the screen as she taps at the keys with her feelers. She was called out suddenly in the middle of the night, but she seems to be enjoying herself.

In the end, "I'm going back!" "Wait wait!" "I'm really unhappy!!" "Please, Amaryllis!!" after such a pointless squabble that lasted for more than ten minutes, I gave up, and called Viscaria.

"Hey, be happy~"

"Like I care!"

I turn away in a puff. I can at least bear with him if he said “let’s watch together”, but I never thought he would use me as “bait” to call out Viscaria. Why am I so peeved though?

“Woah, this is amazing. As to be expected of our masters’ top secret parts! The encryption level is of a completely different level.”

Viscaria continues to decrypt excitedly. Looking at her, she seems to be as delighted as a child who obtained a new game.

“Has it been cracked?”

I sit by her side. Since we’re here, I guess we should see our masters’ secret no matter what, even if we do not return.

“Wait. Let’s decrypt this one, and then remove the lock inside, the password—”

The feelers extending out from her right hand tap at the keyboard messily.

“Right, last move!”

Jajan! The feelers tap the keys, ostensibly creating this effort, and the screen suddenly flickers. After that, the screen turns dark, and countless words fill it.

“Decrypted it yet?”

“Of course.”

Viscaria gives a thumbs up with her feelers. She’s effervescent when it comes to fixing or inspecting people, but her face is brimming with joy, like a child playing tag. Maybe those hands of hers really do love working.

“Right, let’s watch this lewd video.”

Eisbahn hooks his arm around my shoulder.

“No way. Anyway, that’s not a lewd video.”

“Hehehe.”

At this moment.

“—May I inquire, is this the place, where the video shall be played?”

““Woah!?””

We look back in unison. The silver mask face, ‘iron arm’ Götz is standing there.

“Wh-when did you…?”

Taken aback, I ask. “I shall say that it has been for a while.” He quietly answers.

“Why are you here, you bastard!?”

“Lady Viscaria summoned me here.”

“What?”

Eisbahn turns back to look at Viscaria. And this big sister with short red hair merely answers, “It’s a rare chance, so I thought everyone should have a look.”

“Gracious am I for the invitation.”

—Eh?

I again look at Götz.

“That’s surprising. I thought you would be opposed to this, Götz.”

“Why do you imply so?”

“Well, Chief said ‘it’s forbidden to take it out’, right? Don’t you always oppose such rulebreaking, Götz?”

And so, Götz immediately frowns, giving a grim look.

—Ah, no good?

“No, well, I would say that I am male after all, I do have some interest in the secrets of a female body…”

“Huh? Female body?”

“Am I wrong? ‘Everyone is watching a porno video, so come along, Götz.” This is what Lady Viscaria said to me…”

Everyone turn towards Viscaria in unison.

“Huh…?”

She tilts her head, blinking away. Then, she points at the poly screen, asking with some surprise.

“This isn’t lewd though?”

They’re all hopeless.

And so,

It’s not the lewd video everyone (?) hopes for, but as agreed, we start the playback of the chip, Surrounding the screen from right to left are Eisbahn, me, Viscaria and Götz.

Once the video plays, everyone’s eyes are focused on the screen.

“Woah, is this before the ‘Ice Age’…?”

Shown on the Poly screen is a scenery of a city with tall buildings. Before the station, as the crowd moves along, there is a man saying something. Unfortunately, the voice is no recorded, but looking at the logo on the screen, one can tell that it is an enterprise promotional video.

—Masters…

To the audience of that time, it must have been a footage they have been very familiar to them. But to us, who lived underground for a hundred years, there is a strong sense of nostalgia. There are signs of masters, the roads our masters walk on, the laughter from our masters, the breathing of our masters— “Look! A kindergarten! So many children!!”

I, an ex-nanny robot, get excited after seeing the footage of the kindergarten.

“Such a large maintenance plant…”

The ex-mechanic Viscaria watches with her eyes dazzling.

“There is the theater! The National Central Theater!”

Ex-actor Götz brings his face close to the screen.

The bustling streets, the relaxing suburbs, the lush plains, the unheralded ports—these images suddenly pop up on the screen along with the introduction from the reporter. Whenever a new place is shown, “Wah!” “Shocking!” “How nostalgic it is.” There are such cheers. Such a scene is akin to children visiting a zoo for the first time “Amazing, it’s a panda!” “There’s a lion there!”.

But amongst us, only Eisbahn seems different. From time to time, he stares quietly at the screen, sometimes lowering his eyes. He seem to be somewhat uneasy.

—Speaking of which.

I have a thought.

—What did Eisbahn use to do?

It’s a doubt I used to have. Viscaria’s a mechanic, Götz’s an actor, and I used to be a nanny. However, nobody knows about Eisbahn’s past at all. I asked about it many times, but he always diverted the topic “Let’s not talk about the past.”

Blond, flirt, a powerful weapon with that right arm. Nobody knows how he end up like this, through what experiences. Even I, the closest to him in this village (though that's also because he's always harassing me), know little about him.

—Well, maybe he's a bouncer at a strip club or something.

I glance at his sidelong face.

The listless, lowered eyes show a melancholic look, somewhat gloomy.

And so three hours pass.

"Ahh…"

Once the video stops, everyone let out a nostalgic sigh.

After a hundred years, we finally see footage of our beloved masters. It is a wonderful record filled with much nostalgia, joy and melancholy.

While mesmerized, I space out for a little while.

—Eh, but, wait…?

Once my excitement fades, I start to have a doubt in my heart.

"Hey, don't you find this strange?"

"Huh?" Viscaria, who has been checking the condition of the player, turns around, "How is it strange?"

"Didn't they say that it's top secret? There are a lot of masters showing up, which is wonderful…but how is it top secret?"

"Ah."

Viscaria too seem to have realized this, and opened her mouth.

“Well, truly it is simply a daily scenery despite the record of it becoming top secret.”

Götz too puts his hand at his chin, and tilts his head.

“I say, Eisbahn, that was from the ‘top secret’ shelf, right?”

I look towards the blond next to me. “Well, yeah.”

“The words ‘top secret’ are there.”

“Now that’s weird. There’s nothing special that has to be kept top secret.”

I tilt my head.

—Ah, right.

I recall something.

“Anyway, who’s that robot anyway?”

I ask, and Götz in turn ask me, “May I inquire what you mean?”

“I’m talking about the robot in the secret room.”

“Ahh, the one that died in front of the monitor…”

“Right right. If that part is ‘top secret’, I’m guessing it has something to do with that robot.”

I try to deduce, “That’s possible.” Eisbahn mutters.

“Looks like we need to investigate that room thoroughly.”

“I’ll go get permission from the Chief.”

“Let’s just ignore the old man.”

“No can do.”

While we continue to debate this amongst ourselves.

“Wait a moment.”

Viscaria suddenly raises her hand.

“I see, so that’s how it is. Everyone, gather around.”

“What what, what is it?”

Everyone sit around Viscaria, whose eyes are staring at the operating screen.

“That was a dummy video.”

“Dummy?”

“I thought the encryption is completely cracked. Looks like I’m still missing a bit.”

“In other words, the real secret is behind this?”

“Yes yes.”

Viscaria’s right hand reaches for the feelers, Ho hum, hm hm, ooh, and she starts to mumble to herself.

“Now this is the last step!”

She tap at the keys, and the screen again shows up. “Looking forward to it!” “Heh, there’s a sequel.” “I’d say that I am looking forward to it!” all over us are filled with expectations.

The player glows. The video begins. And so, we understand— The reason why it is classified as top secret.

After more than ten seconds of sandy wind, the video finally gets to the main point.

“…?”

What first appear is something that appears like a wide space. Tens of thousands of people are gathered there, and they seem to be people protesting a dictatorship, as roars and yells can be heard.

"…Kill!"

The people are shouting something. With bloodshot eyes, they are yelling "Kill them!" "Die!" "Move!" "You got to be joking!" Amongst them, "Save me!" "Noo!" There are shrieks from women, and the crying from the children lingers on. Such a scene is akin to a depiction of a horror movie I the end times.

—End times…?

We check on the filming date, and find that it's filmed one hundred and eight years ago. That is the year when the world suddenly got struck by a cold wave, and quickly entered the ice age—the 'end time'. The cold wave froze every living creature, and the people who were running away under its terror. Before the ice age began, many masters were already swallowed by the cold.

—But it's weird.

Looking at them, it seem the people were 'divided into two groups'. There are thousands of people on the cliff, and tens of thousands of people in the valleys below. Looking from above, it appears to be two armies facing off.

"Don't they look like military robotos?"

Viscaria points at the screen. Over there, hundreds of black glowing robots are lined in a row, and the soldiers seem to be standing guard there, looking down at the tens of thousands of people in the crowd. It seems like they're there to protect the 'minority' on the cliff, against the 'majority' at the bottom of the cliff.

"Looking at the models, it's probably the later generation of the 'F.310'…"

Viscaria says with a serious look.

—What are they doing?

The hordes of tens of thousands appear to be approaching the bottom of the cliff. Some on the front group have begun to scale the cliff.

“It’s basically a rebellion.”

Eisbahn mutters. “Why, yes.” Götz gives a rare agreement. Both of them watch on grimly.

Finally, the military robots occupying the ledge slowly raise their thick metal arms. The arms bend at right angles, showing long silver-colored cylinders.

—Guns…?

The guns are fired upon the yapping crowd. At this point, I still have yet to understand what this scene before me is about.

“—Fire!”

Some voices echo. It is a loud, booming voice from the commanding soldier. The robots receiving this command start to shoot lights from their arms, blue lasers spewing from their guns in unison.

—Eh…?

The lasers rain upon the front of the group. Juuu, there seem to be something steaming away, and the bright red smoke fizzle out like a geyser. Slabs of meat rain from the skies, and only then do I realize that it’s vaporized ‘blood goblets’.

—E-eh…!?

The hundreds of people at the front are vaporized into red steam, and the people at the back sink into chaos. The screams sound like

metallic friction, and there is massive chaos created out of fear and rage—the people who turned around to leave, the people who started to climb out of anger, the ones who fell and got trampled, a man who keeps writhing because the lower body is gone and his guts are spilled out, a woman who appears to be a mother, distraught as her baby has lost its head.

However, this is just the beginning. The arms of the robot fire again, and the blue lasers rain down like divine judgement. The front end of the crowd again explode into blood, and the rain of flesh fall upon them.

Nobody else dares to resist. Those driven by rage are scampering away with blood drained from their faces. The crowd fade quickly like the tide, and those who are trampled and unable to get away are left them like red water spouts.

But, it's not over.

The killing rays appear to have intention to eradicating the fleeing people. A third volley, fourth, numerous shots are fired at the backs of people. There is red blood, red blood, blood goblets, red red red blood blood blood— —Stop it, stop it, stop.....!!

I grab my body with my arms, but even so, my eyes still can't leave the screen. Everyone too is the same. Our eyes are widened, faces blank. We are watching the footage, like dolls with their hearts and minds taken.

On this Poly Screen, the blue hail continue to create a large amount of blood. This is no longer a war, not even a massacre. It is a simple job similar to a pesticide used to spray at insects.

The place filled with people becomes a complete red. The black dots that can be seen escaping are vanishing along the horizon, and the hundreds of wounded who manage to survive—or rather, those red beings that are deformed, become writhing beings that depict hell itself.

Time seems to stand still.

We remain speechless, waiting for the continuation.

Finally, the footage moves away from the red wasteland to the cliff. The footage is taken from high up, so it's probably some surveillance satellite. At the top of the cliff, in the front, are the military robots, and then there are thousands of masters in formation. The objective of that formation— "You're kidding…"

Over there, there is a building with an acute angle, made of glass, an large egg-shaped item can be seen inside, dug into the ground. The large thing (—hammer) that continues to spin, the outer wall that contains numerous capsules (—Cradle), the storage container built into the ground (—REM forest).

Ahh, that's, there's no doubt about it. That white, long, round building is— "The Snow White…"

People with bloodshot eyes scramble towards the Snow White, and sit into the Capsules. Finally, the Snow White absorb them into its belly, spins into the underground, and vanishes below.

There are thousands of people left behind. The abandoned people are screaming and wailing in despair and rage. Finally, a surging white smoke rose, freezing the helpless people. The human figures glittering in light are as pretty as crystal dolls, but in the end, their heads and limbs are loped and dropped off in the winds, shattered as they turn into dust.

The ones left at the top of the cliff are robots. Our comrades made of black metal, who started killing to protect their masters, raise their thick arms in battle position, remaining still. Like people dressed in mourning clothing for a funeral, their eyes lost luster as they look down at the frozen land. The footage ends.

Nobody could say anything.

Memory

Sleep well, sleep well, sleep well for today.

I shall continue to hold you in my arms, so sleep well.

I finished the lullaby, and the room's filled with peaceful rest. There were more than thirty children sleeping in the nap room of the kindergarten. The children were sleeping peacefully in the room, the children were sleeping with their feet reaching out from the blankets, the children sucking their thumbs like a cat as they sleep; I can determine their personalities from how they sleep.

—Goodness, you'll catch a cold.

There's a boy revealing his cute bellybutton. I adjust his clothes, and drape the blanket over him. Human children are very weak; managing their conditions is a must.

The bright lights shone through the curtain gaps, and the spring breeze shook the branches outside. I sensed the wind of life. It's the spring anyone would sleep in.

"Good work."

A hand patted my shoulder. I lifted my face, and saw a kind face.

"Thank you very much, principal."

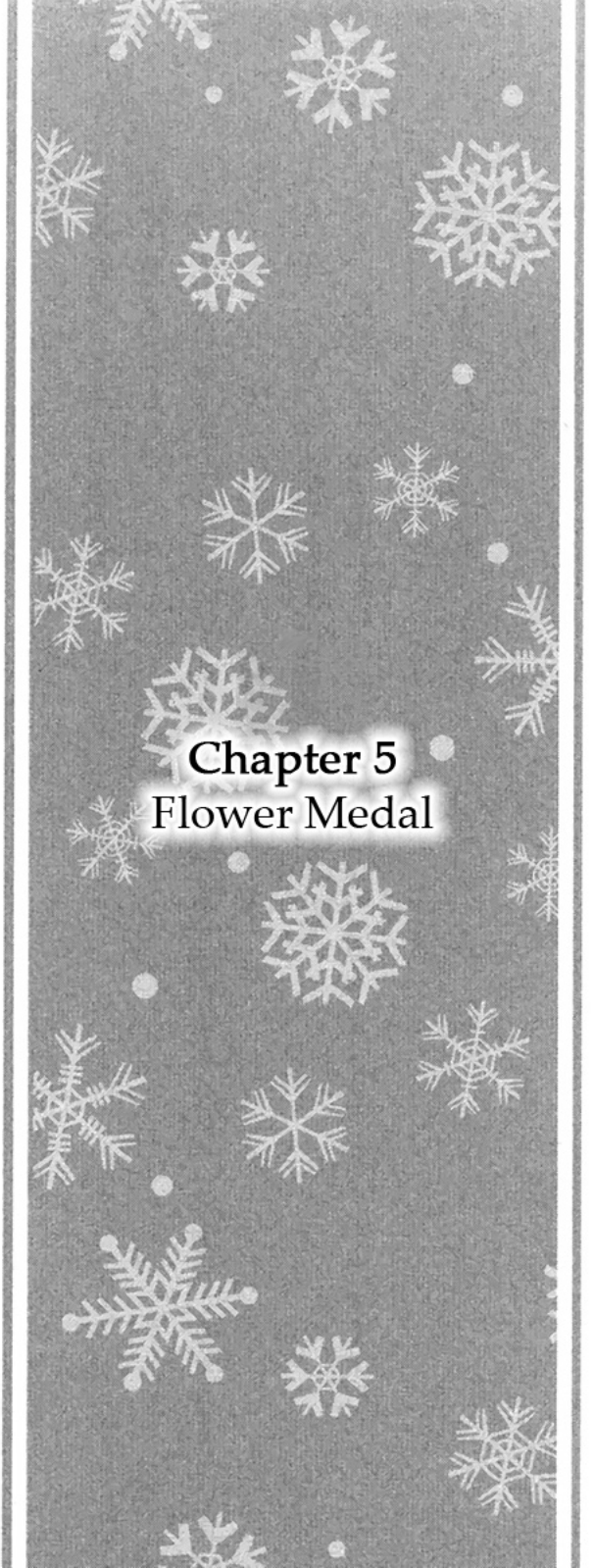
"Go have a rest."

"Yes. Thank you very much for your concern."

The principal left, and I stayed back to watch the children's sleeping face. There would be some who would reveal their bellies, some who would cry as they wet the bed. I still couldn't look away from them; most important I love this time. So serene, peaceful; it's the best time for me, as though everything is covered with warm love.

The children sleep on peacefully, with innocent looks.

Innocent faces, with no sense of doubt on them.



Chapter 5
Flower Medal

Chapter 5 – Flower Medal

Peaceful breaths, innocent sleeping faces.

I watch the children sleep at the plaza, and feel a sense of warmth inside me, and at the same time, some pain.

The child model robots have a long history to them. At first, they were created for couples who were unable to conceive or lost their children, and later on, they end up a massive category supporting the robot industry. Those child robots that like to smile, cling to others, and yet be so understanding have a general popularity in the market, and they were often cared for, doted on by their human 'parent's as though they are the actual children.

However, the passing of time remains cruel. Once their masters, 'the parents' die, child robots would have finished their mission, and would be sent to be scrapped at a plant. For the robots who not only fetched a high initial fee, but a high maintenance cost, the death of their masters implied their own deaths.

Of course, there are robots that barely avoided the fate of being scrapped and ended up in the second-hand shops. Most of the robots in this village are of this case. The children of the village cling onto me too not, not because I'm too patronizing, but because they desired for family. They had a sad programming to yearn for family, hoping to fawn, and they continued to seek love even over a hundred years.

—Love, huh...

I, once a caretaker robot, would sing to them once every two days and coax them to sleep. I don't know whether a robot like me has this thing called 'love', but I still want to do my best for the children. Until the day our masters awake and are able to give them true love.

—But.

A trauma flashes in my mind. It's the nightmarish scenery I saw four days prior.

—I never thought...such a thing happened.

I too experienced the 'end time'. I was transferred from the kindergarten, and was working as a construction robot at a certain place in the city. When the cold wave spread, I was ordered to change my workplace, and deployed to the construction venue of the 'Snow White'. The images of being deployed to transport the materials with the heavy type robots still remain fresh in my Mind Circuits.

However, such a visual image was a first. No matter whether I was present, it is unfathomable to think that I had no impression of such a major event. There were killings in the thousands, yet is it possible that this information did not reach me?

—Was my memory wiped off...?

Due to certain reasons, the data back then was erased from my Mind Circuit. If this is the case, it explains things. Or rather, this is the only thing I can think of.

But why? Erased because it's not beneficial for humans? Is it just me? Or are the other villagers, industrial robots all the same? If our Mind Circuits are modified, and records disadvantageous to human history can be erased, then my feelings—my thoughts, my adoration, my utmost efforts to my masters—are they all created artificially? Is the utmost adoration I have of the Principal fabricated too? Or is it just an imprinted mindset?

—I don't know. What is real, what is fake...I don't know at all.

The more I start to doubt, the more uneasy I feel. I can't even trust in my own memories at all. There is no way I can come up with an accurate conclusion.

And right when I'm deeply frustrated over why I can't get the answer.

“What, you’re here.”

I lift my face, and standing before me is a woman wearing a beret.

“Hm…the children are really clinging onto me.”

“They’re sleeping well.”

Viscaria looks around, seemingly impressed. There are sheets laid out on the plaza, and the children are recharging, sleeping with their limbs completely limber. Child robots have a ‘nap function’ that allows them to automatically fall asleep. In terms of power saving, this function is really recommended. The effectiveness for recharging at least is most optimal when they don’t move.

“I have something to discuss with you.”

“What is it?”

“I want to do an emergency diagnosis soon.”

“Eh?”

I look at her. She had just carried out treatment.

“Why again?”

“Well basically…”

Viscaria would later say; as we have lived underground for a long time, there has been an upward trend of dire metallic fatigue, ‘metal frostbite’. If a robot’s body is to freeze, the worst case scenario will be if they show signs of breaking down.

This trend has been escalating further recently.

“Two weeks ago, it was seven cases. Last week, it was eleven. This week, we have twenty.”

“Eh, twenty already? That’s too much.”

“That’s why we need an emergency diagnosis.”

Viscaria pulls her beret down, and closes her eyes with fatigue. In fact, with the number of patients sent to her all day long, she has yet to rest well as she has to diagnose them.

“You’re really busy going around with the resupplies, yet you came by to help.”

“Well I have to. Maybe we can get more people to help you diagnose. I’ll make a request to the Chief.”

“I’ll leave it to you.”

“Anyway, we need to find one way to deal with this…”

Recently, there has been a lot of issues happening in the village. Frequent earthquakes, sudden collapses, frostbites happening one after another, icemobile malfunctioning. The villagers ‘extracting’ has become more common recently too.

—Maybe.

I lift my head, and suddenly have this thought.

—If I’m to show these children ‘that footage’, what will they think?

The thirty children before my eyes are sleeping in different postures. I can no longer look at their innocent sleeping faces directly.

“Ma…mama…”

Someone mutters.

“Nice butt today!”

“Kyaaa!”

I frantically turn around, as I have been molested on the butt. Grinning away is the flirt.

“Can’t you be a little more dcent in how you greet others?”

“So, I should rub your breasts?”

“You Assbahn!!”

Eisbahn takes a kick from me, “Ow, it hurts!” And jumps up high.

“If you’re going to keep this up, I’m going to ask Viscaria to do an operation on you.”

“Well, those are some bold words from a virgin.”

“I’m serious.”

“Scary, scary.”

Haa, I sigh. This is the only guy not worried at all, even when the village’s ravaged with earthquakes and frostbites.

“If you’re still a Senator, please show some care for the future of the village.”

“But I do think of a lot of things.”

“Stop lying.”

I slap away his sticky hand that’s reaching for my chest, and walk away, “Wait, don’t be angry now~” he’s still pestering me.

“Where are you going?”

“Nothing to do with you.”

“The Village Council again, right?”

“Yeah, any suggestions?”

“Can’t you contact through the wireless.”

“I haven’t been able to contact the Chief through the wireless, so I’m going straight to him to talk. Discuss about the frostbites and the countermeasures.”

“You’re serious.”

“You’re the one who isn’t serious.”

I try to shake Eisbahn off, and storm forward, and he continues to follow me like goldfish poop. I have been cold to him, and not cute at all, but why is this guy pestering me all the time?

Huffing my shoulders in rage, I storm forward, and at this moment.

—!

Boom, the earth shakes.

It’s a tremendous termor. There has been little quakes over the past month, but such a scale is really abnormal. It just feels like the entire earth bounces up to strike me, as I lose my balanace and collapse. Eisbahn next to me is flailing around too.

This tremor lasts for a long time. The earth shakes side to side over this duration that lasts more than a minute, and several icicles, dozens of them, fall from the ceiling. We try to hide in some houses, but can’t stand up right, and can only remain where we are until the shaking stops.

And then.

—Is it…over?

I tentatively lift my face off the ground, and the ice fragments shatter, falling off my face. “Ugh…” Eisbahn too lifts his face.

“I thought I was going to die…”

“…M-me too.”

Still rattle, we hold hands and stand up, surveying the surroundings. There are numerous ice blocks of various sizes scattered around, with the walls of a few collapses houses appearing in our eyes. There's no doubt this is a severe situation.

"Emergency contact...!"

I open all communication channels, shouting,

"This is Vice Chief Amaryllis! Notifying all blocks! Report on the situation immediately! I repeat, report on the situation immediately...!"

And in the meantime, my Mind Circuits receive the reports from all over the village.

"This is Left Wing B! We have lots of people trapped under collapsed houses! Requesting for immediate aid!"

"Right Foot D! Four are critically injured, we're lacking in parts!"

"E6 of the Body! We got kids buried alive! Hurry, save them!"

The injury reports come in shrieks, and in an instant, there are more than fifty injured. I immediately give the instruction,

"To all Blocks! Refer to Manual 7, 3C! Parts warehouse and supplies shall be released for all! Prioritize those with damaged Mind Circuits! After that, send all the injury reports to the Village Council Hall! Understood1?"

I give the commands, "Chief!" and switch the channel.

"You hear me!? It's Vice Chief Amaryllis! Chief! Chief...!"

I desperately call for the Chief through the emergency circuit. There is no answer.

—Seriously? At this moment...!

“Accessing Council data with Vice Chief’s permissions! Birdmap!”

And so, a large map appears before my eyes immediately. This is the holographic image only I can see, aired in my Mind Circuit.

—Ah!

Looking at it, there are red lights flashing at the path leading to the Snow White.

—Not good!

“Viscaria! Götz! You two alright...!?”

I call for the other Senators through the wireless. **“I’m fine.” “So am I!”** I quickly get my response.

“We’ll head to the Snow White to have a look! We’ll leave the saving to you two!”

”Got it!” “Fine with us!

As both of them reply in unison,

“Let’s go, Eisbahn!”

“Right!”

We race off with all our might.

“Heya!”

After some flashes of blue light, the large ice blocks are shattered. On the path leading to the Snow White, several dozen meters are obstructed by collapsed ice blocks.

“Watch this...!!”

The ice is sliced, and then the collapsed bits are halved. Eisbahn's 'Phantom Blade' continues to cut through the ice, as though digging a tunnel, and the fragments of shaved ice pile by the side.

"Wait!" I sense some metal. "Someone's there...!"

"What?"

He stops his hand blade.

"Buried alive?"

"Most likely! Try digging that corner there! Be careful!"

"Right!"

Eisbahn controls the output of his blade, melting the ice like a burner. There are flowers and grass embedded inside the ice, probably as it was close to the 'REM Forest', and white smoke fizzles once it touches the laser.

"Oh...!"

Eisbahn raises his voice,

"What?"

"I see it!"

He grabs the grey elbow poking out from the ice, and pulls it out. The robot buried alive has a hemispherical head, a round pudgy body, and caterpillar legs.

"Eh...!?"

We exclaim in unison.

"Why is Gappy here...!?"

I support Gappy's body with both hands, checking his reaction. The

light of the visual installation has vanished.

“Wait! We’ll save you now!”

I open Gappy’s body, and quickly draw out the battery. I connect the spare battery, and with a whoosh, the light appears again.

“Ga…”

“Gappy, you alright? Can you hear me?”

“Ama…ry, lls…?”

Gappy’s hemispherical head turns around with a creak, making sure I appear in the round lenses of his.

—This is some severe frostbite…

As he was buried alive, his body’s is as frozen as ice. The cracks are very serious, and it may be dangerous for him if this keeps up.

“Gappy, your frostbite is really severe. Don’t move at all. Stay here until everyone comes here.”

“Gappy…understands…”

I have him hold the spare battery, and we continue with the repairs. I should have Gappy returned to the village, but our priority here is to check on the Snow White. This is our mission as the villagers.

—Please wait, Gappy.

“Let’s hurry!”

“R-right…!”

I sweep the hair behind me, and get back to repairs.

Eisbahn’s blue light blade continues to swing, hacking away at the

ice, scattering them.

—However.

There has one thing I am still wondering.

—Why is Gappy here…?

After we finally make our way to the ‘REM Forest’, we continue to linger before it.

“Chief, Chief…! Can you hear me, Chief…!!”

Without the Chief’s permission, we cannot enter the Snow White.

—Seriously, where is he…!?

“Get down!”

Eisbahn raises his arm up,

“What are you going to do!?”

“No choice but to barge in!”

Eisbahn swings the arm straight down with all his might. The Phantom Blade at full power hits the thick doors hard, and sparks fly, a dent created.

“Sure is tough…another one!”

Eisbahn’s then swings another blade down in the same manner. With a dull zoom, the door is finally pierced through.

“Alright!”

He swings the blade sideways, cutting a sharp angle through the door. He creates a triangular hole that’s large enough for a person to slip through.

“I’m going in!”

“Be careful!”

I slip through the opening, and Eisbahn follows.

Upon entering, we’re stunned.

“You’re kidding..”

The ‘Spindle’ that forms the Snow White has stopped spinning, the light vanished, devoid of life. I look, and see the wreckage that collapsed from above stopping the axis. There are a few ‘cradles’ lying on the floor. This devastation is similar to a beehive ravaged by a bear.

—What in the world...!

“Eisbahn! I’m restarting the power! I’ll leave the debris on the axis to you!”

“Right!”

We get down to work with both hands. There is an emergency power source to prevent the Cradles from being frozen, but I have no idea how long it can last.

—Got to hurry...!

‘Think’, the level’s pushed up, but the Snow White shows no response at all.

—Manual activation doesn’t work...!

I summon the contraol panel on the wall, and tap at the keys in a prayerful manner.

“Huh!”

I can hear Eisbahn’s yell above me, and the sound of air being

ripped apart echoes. The shattered debris scatter all over.

"Got it out!"

"Thanks!"

I call out, and tap at the keys.

—Masters, maters…!

The memories race in my mind. The masters with the kind smiles, the masters who kept thinking for my sake. And then—

—Fire!

"Ugh…!"

For a moment, my hands stop. I want to hurry up and save my masters, but I have another imagery appearing in my might. This is 'that footage' I am not willing to think of.

—Ugh…!

I shake my head slightly, trying to cast aside my doubts, and get to work. Once the control panel shows the affirmation button,

"Please, work…!"

I exclaim, and slam the panel. Several times.

Immediately,

With a rumbling sound, the Snow White glows. The light races through the surface of the Spindle, like blood filling the vessels, and the axis start to spin.

"Thank goodness…"

I heave a sigh. For a moment, I feel perturbed, but I'm still able to save our masters. For some reason, I feel a sense of huge relief.

—Then, next.

All I have to do is to put by the fallen Cradles back into position, and the repairs will be done. I scan the room, and run off to the nearest Cradle.

At this moment.

Boom, the floor shakes.

—No way, another one...!?

The earthquake strikes again, and I lose my balance, falling to the floor.

The earthquake rattles the Snow White, and the axis that has just recover let out a creaking shriek. Icicles fall from the ceiling.

—Oh no...!

The shattered ice rains on a little Cradle in the middle. If this continues, it'll be dangerous.

"Ugh...!"

I crawl to the Cradle as fast as I can, but the shaking doesn't stop, and I can't go forward as I hope, as my feet are slippery.

Yet at this moment.

"Ga-Ga-Ga—pyy!!"

A shrill sound rings, and a robot appears in the room. That robot quickly slams towards the Cradle.

—Gappy!?

"I-I-I-I-I-I-I-I...!"

As the world continues to rattle in the earthquake, Gappy spins his

caterpillar legs, and dashes forward with a speed that's basically impossible for the usual him—as fast as the assisted run during the Prayer Festival.

The icicle blade strikes Gappy from above, and the sharp fragments stabs into the floor. Even so, the brave robot continues forward without care for his own safety. The figure of what has been derided as scrap no longer exists, and showing up instead is a brave warrior driven by his mission and mobility.

So cool. So I thought.

But,

Right when Gappy's about to knock aside the Cradle on the floor.

—Ah!

A really large icicle falls from the ceiling. "Damn it!" Eisbahn tries to slash it apart with his blade, but barely misses.

"Gappy, move!!!"

However, he didn't. After knocking it aside with his caterpillar legs, he loses his balance, tumbling over hard.

And gets crushed beneath.

"Gappy..."

The fragment lands deep into the back, stabs through the abdomen, and into the floor. He's unable to move, like an insect that's made into a sample. The brave robot grimaces in agony,

"I-I-I-I can't..."

"You can't, Gappy. Just stay there, don't move."

I know my voice is trembling. Gappy's lower body fall limp, like organs spilled out, and his head is tilted to the other side.

“Wait. I’ll get the Mind Circuit out—”

“N-no, need, for, that…”

He barely tilts his head,

“I-I-I’m, not…going, to, make, it.”

“Don’t say day!”

I yell out to deny him. However, I know that he’s wounded critically, beyond the point of salvaging. The arms are showing cracks, about to break apart.

“M-m-m-my…M-M-Mi-Mind…Circuit, is…gone.”

After hearing it, I search from the hole on his body, and cut the cables apart to check on the rectangular Mind Circuit. The frozen circuit is full of cracks, like a melting lake, waiting to break apart.

For us villagers, there is no backup to that. The Memory that can store important data have been offered to the Snow White. Thus, once the Mind Circuits are wrecked, we can’t repair them anymore.

In other words, we will die.

“I-I-I—”

Gappy tries his best to say,

“W-want to, give…”

“Eh?”

“Give, Daisy…this..”

Gappy opens his mouth, and in the mouth that’s as dark as a cave, there is a little ice fragment.

“U, ggg…”

With his trembling hands, he takes out the ice fragment from his mouth. This fragment continues a pink petal, and though its uneven and not too good looking, it's—a flower medal.

—I want to give this medal, to Daisy.

These were the words he said at the park, in the middle of the night.

Finally, I realize why Gappy came to the 'REM forest'.

He came here for Daisy. Daisy really wanted the medal of the prayer festival, and so Gappy came to the 'REM forest' to pick a flower.

"This, is, for, Daisy…"

"No, Gappy. You need, to, give this, to her…"

"I-I…cannot…"

"—We'll take it."

A pair of hands are placed on my shoulders before I know it. I turn around, and see Eisbahn standing there.

"But."

"Just go with Gappy's feelings here…okay?"

He nods towards me. I have never seen him so serious before.

"…Right."

I receive the medal from Gappy's hands.

"Th-thank you."

After that, Gappy's body sinks down, as though all his energy is depleted.

The lights deep inside the roun lenses are slowly vanishing.

“No, Gappy. Let’s go back to the village together.”

Again, I grasp his hand hard.

“Have…”

Gappy looks up at the Snow White, asking with a feeble voice,

“I…contributed…anything…”

The voice gets weaker,

“To…masters…?”

“Yes.”

I hold in my tears, eking out these words,

“You’re so cool, so courageous when you protected that Cradle.”

“I, se…”

“Yes…so..”

I pull out the pendant hanging on my neck. It’s the ‘Grand Prix’ flower medal I was awarded during the Prayer Festival.

“Gappy, I hereby award this ‘Grand Prix’ to you.”

I hang the flower medal on his neck. Tiingg, the medal collides with his body like a chime, giving off a tragic sound.

“I-I-I-I’ve received, the Grand, Prix…”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“Is this, okay/”

“You risked your life to protect our masters. This medal really suits

you well."

"Hehe...I, Did, it..."

He smiles with all his might.

"If, Daisy, knows."

He ekes out his final words.

"She, will, surely, be, shocked."

Vbbring, and a sharp sound echoes. Stunned, I look at the large hole in Gappy's abdomen. The silver rectangular item inside, the – Mind Circuit—falls to the fall, shattering into fragments of various sizes like glass. This is the terminal symptom of a metal frostbite.

Thus, Gappy would never move, forever.

Memory

Gaooo Gooo. I continue to move forward.

"Alright, charge! Charge!"

I could hear Daisy shouting from above.

"It's Gappy!" "Scrappy! Scrappy's attacking!" "Everyone, run!"

The children all run away with much enthusiasm, Gaooo Gaoo, and I give chase,

"Hey, faster! Gappy!"

Daisy prompts me. However, I could no longer accelerate, and ended up being abandoned by everyone.

The short hide-and-seek ended.

"Ahh~ahh, Gappy, you're so slow, stupid..."

“I-I-I did my best, there.”

“Your best isn’t enough here.”

Before I realized it, only Daisy and I were left in the park. As usual, we’re both alone.

“D-D-Daisy.”

“What?”

“Wh-why, aren’t, you, leaving?”

“Huh?”

Daisy bends down, looking at me.

“What do you mean?”

“I-I’m an, idiot, so, everyone, ran away. But, Daisy, you, didn’t leave…why?”

“What why…I don’t care about that.”

“I-I-I-I want to know. I, want, to, know, what you’re thinking, Daisy.”

Daisy looked at me. After a short pause,

“–Back then.” she started to talk about her past, a rare thing at that, “When Papa and Mama were still alive, I had a toy who often played with me. He had the same appearance as you, and kept running and shouting, Gaoo Gaoo, like that.”

“I-I, see…”

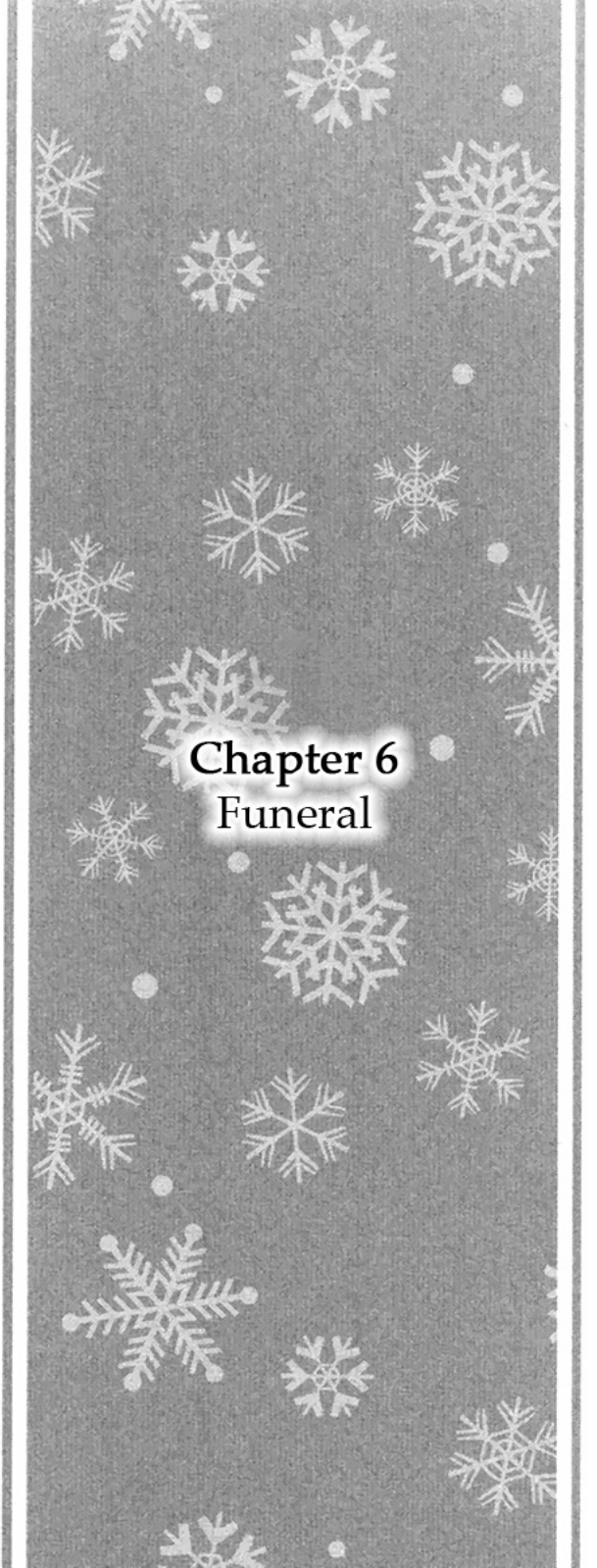
“So, when I first met you, I thought it’s like we’re reunited…that’s all.”

And for some reason, Daisy awkwardly emphasized “Really, that’s

all there is."

I love Daisy. More than anyone else in the world.

It will be great, if we can make amends, tomorrow.



Chapter 6
Funeral

Chapter 6 – Funeral

The funeral is held three days later.

There were six whose Mind Circuits were in an irreparable state—in other words, dead. Thirty eight of them were grievously wounded, their limbs having fallen off, and more than eighty have light wounds. This is the biggest tragedy to befall the village.

The funeral is to be held in the arena at the center of the village, and of the villagers attending the ceremony, most of them are lacking in arms and legs.

"To the six compatriots who have devoted their all to the village, we shall pray for them to be blessed. The funeral shall now begin."

Cattleya hosts the ceremony, and Götz handles the crowd. It's the exact same allocation of personnel as the Prayer Festival a month ago, but the atmosphere is completely quiet, the old bustling atmosphere no longer present.

The altar on the stage has the corpses of the deceased. Those attending will take out bits of the corpses' parts, and move them to the coffin. It's akin to the 'bone ash picking' humans to, and this has been a custom in the village for almost a hundred years. I put the flower medal Gappy gave me before he died into the cinerary (Parts case), along with his parts.

"There's still one more…?"

Only after the funeral ends, and everyone disperses, do we realize this.

"When did it vanish, it is unknown."

Götz, who was managing the scene, grimly reports. According to him, there should be six 'parts cases', but one of them vanished.

“Someone actually stole a parts case…”

“This is the greatest failure of this Götz…”

Götz’s silver mask contorts, showing a pained look.

“No, this isn’t your fault. Nobody would have expected the parts case to be stolen.”

Till this point, there hasn’t been a crime like a robbery or theft in the village, let alone stealing a parts case.

“You say that there’s one missing. Whose is it?”

“Well…”

He winces harder than before.

“Sir Gappy’s.”

—Maybe?

I hide this shock inside my heart, trying to act calm.

“Leave the search to me. Please manage the arena, Götz. Keep this a secret from everyone, okay?”

I have an idea.

The only one who would steal Gappy’s parts either has a huge grievance against him, or— —As expected…

At the part several minutes from the Village Council Hall, there is a girl with soft chestnut-colored hair. She’s at the swing, all alone, holding the parts box in both hands.

“So you’re here.”

I approach the girl, and sit on the swing next to hers. This is the place Gappy stayed at in the middle of the night, trying to look for

Daisy.

Daisy lowers her head, “Hm…”, and weakly answers me.

Just like this, both of us remain silent for a while.

Daisy stares into space, blinking from time to time. I watch the white sidelong face of the girl.

This continues on for another five minutes or so.

“—Gappy.”

Daisy moves her soft lips, turning her face halfway towards me.

“He has been looking for me ever since we argued. He kept looking for me every day, trying to make amends with me.”

Daisy finally starts to talk, like a dam that collapsed. I quietly listen to her.

“But, I, ran away. I ran away from Gappy. I couldn’t bring myself to meet his face, so I ran away from him. And then, and then—”

Her voice starts to tremble.

“Gappy, he’s dead…”

I continue to remain silent, just staring at the gloomy sidelong face of the girl, waiting for her next words.

In Daisy’s clutches, a silver cylinder case is glittering. It contains the vivisected parts of Gappy. The body shattered due to frostbite, and shrank to an alarmingly small size, as though it was cremated, able to be contained the grasp of the girl’s arms.

“I know that. I know that, it’s my fault, but I didn’t apologize. So Gappy died. G-Gappy, died, bcause of me…”

A tear appear in the girl’s eyes.

“Daisy.”

I stand up from the swing, and kneel before the girl. Our eyes meet beyond the parts case. Daisy’s large eyes are filled with a moist glint.

“Gappy finished his mission. Through his will, through his decision, he saved our masters. It’s not your fault. Gappy decided it.”

“…”

Daisy remains silent. However, a tear trickles down her cheek silent.

How much distilled sadness is filled in this tear? How much anguish is filled in it? My heart winces as I watch this clumsy girl sob.

And as the third tear lands on the parts case.

“Amaryllis, tell me…how was Gappy when he died?”

“…Alright.”

I told everything that happened on the day Gappy died. How he came to the ‘REM forest’ to create a Flower medal, how he ended up caught in the collapse, and how he died protecting the ‘Cradle’ of a master.

“So, this.”

I take out a little ice fragment from my pocket, and show it to Daisy.

“This is Gappy’s gift to you.”

“Is this, the, flower medal?”

“Yes.”



I place the flower medal gently on the parts case. Daisy stares at the fragment.

“Gappy…”

The girl reaches for the ice fragment, her finger stroking its surface. The pink flower is encased in ice, the petal scattering listlessly like a faded life.

“Gappy’s so amazing…contributing for our masters, even until the very end…”

Again, the tears appear in the girl’s eyes, and they fall upon the medal, flowing down it, and landing on Gappy’s remains.

“Gappy’s, body…”

As she hugs the parts case tightly, Daisy looks at me, “May I personally bury it…?’

I nod hard “Of course.” And answer.

“Gappy will be happy too.”

“Thanks…”

The girl raises her head, making sure the tear won’t fall our. The seventh tear is wiped away by the girl’s finger, and doesn’t fall.

The next day.

I put my elbows on the icy table, listlessly recalling all that has appeared the past few days.

One, two, three, four, five…six.

Six died. I can’t count them all with a hand, and I fold up the thumb to indicate a sixth.

It’s not the first time we have seen deceased in the village. In this

cruel underground world that's sealed in ice, the deterioration of robots is rapid, and there is a dire shortage of replaceable parts. Ever since we found that the Snow White spare parts were starting to be depleted, about one or two die every year since we started 'extracting'.

—But six...

Never since the 'end times' a hundred years ago did we encounter so many deaths at once. All the villagers really get on well with each other, so the entire village is filled with sadness.

And there's another reason as to why my heart feels so heavy.

—"Gappy's so amazing...contributing for our masters, even until the very end..."

Daisy's words echo in unison with Gappy's.

—"Have, I contributed anything, to masters..."

To serve our masters, to live for them, and to die for them. This is our mission as the villagers, or raison d'etre. Gappy died after he fulfilled his mission. There is nothing to be ashamed of. This might even be the highest honor of them all, to die for this honor.

—But.

I can't help but feel some doubt in my heart. The image of my kind masters, and that footage that seem to paint them completely different.

"—llyis!"

While I'm still brooding over this.

"Hey, Amaryllis! You hear me...?"

I lift my head, and before me is the blond flirt. He's shaking my shoulders with a look of shock.

“Ah…” I finally recover. “Ah, sorry. Just thinking about this.”

“You alright? Quick, give me a wakeup kiss…ack.”

I give a good old wake up punch at the face of this shameless flirt, and turn to everyone else. Viscaria, who’s late, arrived before I knew it, so all the members are present.

“Sorry. Then, let’s get started.”

I sit on the chair again, clear my throat, and say,

“We’re holding an emergency meeting. Chief isn’t around, so this Senate meeting will be held by me, the Vice Chief…first, look at this.”

Tok, with my fingers, I tap at the table, and the holographic visual appear without a sound. It’s a combined picture of the Pillar graphs and the contour groups.

“Four days ago, we have an earthquake that really devastated us. Again, I shall offer my respects to the six compatriots who died…and here is the problem.”

I let the graph glow.

“Due to the earthquakes and frostbites over this period, the casualties keep increasing in numbers. The result is that our parts supply is strained to the limit. We have sixteen parts that cannot be changed anymore. We still have replacements, but even that has limits.”

“We’re probably going to see some dead next week.”

Eisbahn chimes in, “Too careless your words are.” Götz chides.

“Now then, as for the countermeasures that can work…”

I show the solutions on the screen.

■Solving the parts shortage

(1) Cut down on supplies issued.

(2) Extend sleep mode.

(3) Carry out another extraction

"—These are the rough thoughts I have."

Once done with my explanation, "A question, if I may ask?" Götz raises his hand.

"Yes, sure."

"Personally, I'd say that I have no specific objection…but any of these will require the Chief's permission, surely?"

"Hmm."

Verbally smacked, I nod away.

"That's true…we can't make formal decisions without the Chief…"

I look at the table. Normally, the Chief's head will be rolling around before me, but at this time, the only things are materials for the meeting.

"This is worrying…"

We lost contact with the Chief completely since days before that 'earthquake' happened. Even through the emergency contact installed in all the villagers, he hasn't responded. This is really unprecedented.

"Probably caught in a collapse, trapped somewhere."

Eisbahn nonchalantly notes.

"But even so, we can at least figure out where he is through the beacon's signal, right?"

"So that means the beacon is also damaged now, isn't it?"

“But how is it possible for that hard sturdy beacon to break that easily…”

The beacon is an installation made convenient to search for people in danger, so of course, it’s very sturdy.

“What do you think, Viscaria?”

“Well…”

The robot most proficient with technology tilts her head, extending her feelers out.

“I can think of another possibility. Some place where electromagnetic waves can’t reach.”

“A place where electromagnetic waves can’t reach? But the entire village’s basically covered, right?”

“Yeah, so it’s a small possibility.”

—Eh, but…?

A certain memory awakens in my mind. A place where electromagnetic waves can’t reach. A place where a beacon can’t respond.

“Ah!”

I get up, and raises a possibility.

“The Secret Room!”

After an hour’s ride on the icemobile.

We enter ‘that room’ again.

The high ceiling, the layout that extends far in. When we first entered, we could be said to be amazed, and now that we’re again entering after a month, it just feels so refreshing. We stand before the

shelves before us, our eyes staring at the items laid out neatly. The interior decorations are all dazzling, and the room is brimming with a charm more dazzling that the most luxurious library, the most posh museum.

But on the other hand, this place does cause us to recall 'that footage'. This doubt will never vanish until the data is deleted.

—This is…

And on the floor tiled with a posh carpet, there is a trail of something moist rolling about. We nod to each other, and follow the trail deep into the house.

At the very end, we arrive at a place with a large monitor. There remains a robot lying on a chair, and also a soft looking sofa, probably a premium seat. The sofa tumbles, and turns towards us.

"—So you came."

Seated on the sofa is a familiar bearded face—

"Chief Chamomile…"

"Oh, it has been a while!"

Chief turns his head around, and cheerfully greets us, "Thank goodness, Chief…you're still alive."

"Yes, alive and jumping!"

Seeing the Chief look so enthusiastic, I feel relieved for the time being.

"Oh my, you people seem lively too. Hahaha!"

"…"

And so, after feeling so relieved, I feel enraged.

“No, sorry, sorry. Hahahahaha!”

“Goodness, you worried us—and you’re laughing!”

I pick up the Chief’s head, and tug at his beard sideways.

“Ouch!”

“You suddenly disappear, and now you go ‘hahahaha’!? You idiot Chief!”

“Well, don’t be so angry owowowowow, I’m really sorry.”

Chief says with tears in his eyes. Such a punishment should be expected when he made everyone worry.

“—Now then.”

I tug at the Chief’s face with both hands, and glare at him with fearsome eyes.

“Where were you, and what were you doing!?”

“Well…owowowow.”

Chief answers with a grimace.

“I’ve been here the entire time.”

“You mean, this ‘secret room’?”

“Well, yes. I have been checking the records of the past, and considering over the future of the village.”

“If that is the case, couldn’t you have discussed it with everyone?”

My anger remains unable to be vented.

“Of course, I do have to discuss this with everyone sooner or later… however, I want to sort out my thoughts first.”

His reply remains as vague as before, but his expression was more serious than ever before.”

“Then, what are your thoughts, Chief?”

“I shall talk about my thoughts later. First, I want to hear your thoughts.”

“Ehh, well that’s fine…”

I want to pursue the matter of the Chief leaving home(?), but the emergency has to be prioritized.

“Now, about the solutions proposed during the meeting…” I put the Chief down on the sofa, and start to explain.

“There are a few solutions, and first—”

I suggest a few solutions to solve the shortage, “Yes, yes”, and Chief appear to be nodding in agreement.

“—So, I want to get your permission, Chief.”

“I see.”

And then, Chief suddenly changes the topic,

“…Anyway, Amaryllis.”

“Yes?”

“How many times have you been ‘extracted’?”

“…EH?”

This sudden question leaves me startled.

Chief repeats the same question.

“I shall ask again. How many times have you offered your parts for

the Snow White?”

“Ah, yes…I think, about seventeen times.”

“Seventeen…probably the most in the village. What about you, Viscaria…?”

“Me?” Viscaria seem troubled by this sudden question, “Sixteen.” And answers.

“Götz?”

“Similarly, sixteen times.”

“Eisbahn, what about you?”

“Same as Amaryllis.”

“Seventeen…hmm?”

Chief nods away, seemingly enlightened, and continues, “Having come down to this underground world, you all and I have been providing maintenance for the Snow White. Day or Night, we did so for every day.”

Chief narrows his eyes in nostalgia.

“We kept prioritizing our masters no matter what, restricting our lives, cutting into our expenses, offering our bodies for them.”

“Hmm, yes…”

I’m skeptical. This should be a discussion about the emergency measures, yet Chief suddenly diverts the topic, and it confuses me.

“Having done that, you will continue to love your masters, serve them, and make self-sacrifices to protect the Snow White for them from now on, no? Is that so, Amaryllis?”

“Yes. But, Chief.”

“What is it?”

“What have you been talking about? It is rude of me, but I have to say that you are stating the obvious. I…”

“Now then, I shall state my conclusion.”

Chief turns his head around to face me. With a sharp look, he looks different from the suual kind Chief.

“I—”

What he says next topples over the history of this village that spans for more than a hundred years.

“Do feel that humans should be wiped out.”

“…Huh?”

At first, we’re unable to understand his words.

“Wipe out…humans?”

“Yes.”

Chief nods again.

“I shall say it again. I do think humans should be wiped out.”

“Erm, Chief.”

“What?”

“Please stop with the lousy joke. ‘Humans’ here refer to ‘masters’, right? This is an unpleasant one.”

I chide, “Yeah, this isn’t funny at all.” Viscaria too adds in. Götz nods away in approval. Eisbahn alone doesn’t say anything, merely giving Chief a sidelong look.

“Not a joke…this is the proof.”

Chief opens his mouth, and with a pop, spits out something. It’s about the size of a little gemstone, with a round button at the top.

“If this is pressed, the Snow White will be destroyed—thus, humans will be wiped out.”

“…Eh?”

We’re looking at the ‘button’ before the Chief in unison. There is a clear case at the top, covering it.

“This switch will stop all energy supply to the Snow White. Once twelve hours pass, it will be wrecked, unsalvageable.”

“Chief!”

I cry out,

“What nonsense are you saying!? Wearing out humans? Destroy the Snow White? Enough already! Our mission is to protect the Snow White, isn’t it? And now you want to destroy it!? Are you crazy!?”

“Am not. Over the past hundred years, I’ve been thinking, wondering. Are humans worth keeping alive? Is there really purpose is sacrificing the innocent, hardworking villagers to protect the humans?”

“Wh-what are you saying…?”

I’m rattled. I have a feeling that my existence is completely denied. I really couldn’t believe that the most elderly in the village, Chief Chamomile said these words.

“U-us robots…work for masters, live for masters. This is why we live for, right?”

“That has been the case till now. But from now, there’s no need for it.”

“How…”

“You saw it, didn’t you? The ‘footage’ of humans killing each other.”

“Th-that is…”

For a moment, I’m speechless. The reviling memory appears in my mind. The two groups of people growling, buzzing, facing off, shooting, the whirlwind of blood blobs—massacres—the Snow White that went underground—the people who were abandoned—the cold wave that struck.”

“Wait, Chief.”

Viscaria interrupts,

“Please explain by going through the points. Either way, destroying or wiping out is too serious a topic here.”

“Hm, certainly…now then.”

And so, Chief sits back on the sofa, seemingly ready to get on point.

“Let me tell you *the truth to this world*.”

It was a rumor regarding the ‘End Times’.

It was just before the ice age came upon the world. Back then, humans were thoroughly troubled by the lack of resources. Crude oil, coal, natural gas, uranium, all of them were dug up and depleted, leaving a dry, barren land. However, the social structure that has been thoroughly ingrained in the concepts of mass productions, mass consumption and mass wastage continue to seek energy. Just as how their massive bellies continue to seek food, humans became hungry monsters that seek energy. Every day, there has been conflicts and wars fought over limited resources.

However, such ugly scuffles came to an end one day. What stopped

it wasn't the military might of a massive country, nor was it a compromise born out an economic agreement, but instead, it was the invention of a new technology.

Crystal Plant

This invention was born out of coincidence.

Since the start of the previous century, there had been competition over mobile facilities, and in the late years, it became a race over highly potent batteries; during this process, a high powered battery called the 'Recycle Quartz'. This Crystal Plant was of high purity, contains small traces of Germanium and carbon; as the name implied, was a unique metal that could be grown as 'stalks' like planets. By soaking them in fluid pools of melted carbon—commonly called 'farms'—and preserving them in low temperatures, they would sprout like 'plants', and within a week, they could be duplicated.

The Crystal Plants contained vast amounts of energy. The power efficiency could be compared favorably to uranium, and there's no radioactive waste to worry about. Also, the Crystal Plants could also be produced indefinitely due to 'grafting', which meant that there was no risk of them running out like cruel oil and coal.

It was truly a miraculous energy. Like a rising market stock, the Crystal Plants expelled all other pre-existing forms of electrical generation, like fire, water, wind, nuclear, and there was a fad of Crystal Plant electric heating in the world. The production of Crystal Plants was very easy; all one needed was a stalk. Thus, the technology to generate electricity through Crystal Plant furnaces was pervasive throughout developed and developing countries. Developing countries in particular obtained an explosion of development due to the mass usage of electricity and industrialization, and it marked the start of a new age called the Crystal Revolution, a technology revolution that could be recorded in world history.

However, this miraculous material that created a massive amount of heat just by adding large numbers suddenly became a demonic

material. A certain year after Crystal Plant furnaces started running for more than fifty years, in a country called Robium[2] that is located in the Far East, a furnace core in the first generator suddenly dropped drastically in temperature. The reasons for that were unknown. The safety installation caused the Crystal Core to suddenly stop operating, but the temperature kept dropping. Later, the furnace was completely frozen, and even the surrounding facilities were all caught up, until the area surrounding the generator became a frozen land. Such a freezing phenomenon kept on happening, and there was a freezing cold wave that started from the generators—which would later be called the 'Ice Age'. Like a bonfire, the cold flames devoured the small country in the Far East.

Like a dried sponge sucking up water, the Crystal Plant furnaces absorbed all the heat from Rodium. The cold wave ran rampant, as all the heat formed seemed to have been sucked back.

Though small in country size, the fact that Rodium became a frozen land within a mere three months shook the entire world. Some did manage to escape overseas, but the citizens who were frozen alive as ice sculptures due to the sudden astronomical rise in airplane tickets took up the majority.

Faced with such decisions, countries around the world ceased operations of the Crystal Plant furnace. Despite the prior tragedies however, there were countries who selfishly continued to generate electricity through Crystal Planets. Large countries in particular bent the safety regulations and evaded the issues by stating that Rodium, the lost country, was a developing country with low skilled populations, or errors. Also, as the freezing phenomenon in Rodium seemed to have abated, this led to debates on both ends. There were many citizens who pleaded to stop the operations of the Crystal Plant furnaces, and researchers who have repeatedly beseeched against such dangers, but they were all ignored in favour of the huge profits from the Crystal Plant furnaces.

And so a second tragedy struck, one that left humans in a state beyond any point of return. The developed countries that were the

first to accept Crystal Plant electricity generation started to show signs of freezing too—'An Ice Age'. This was of an unprecedented scale, and all involving countries were overwhelmed by the trail of ice, the cold wave spreading beyond the oceans, and throughout the entire world.

After that, the world entered an ice age. Faced with such a rampant cold wave, humanity was left with no choice by to escape from the source, to warmer areas. They mobilized all the robots in the world, and built emergency escape houses. Of all the countries, only the richer ones, who form a minority, could occupy these evacuation shelters. After the shelters were built, the robots who were gathered to build them were mercilessly scrapped except for a few used to maintain the faciltiies. Hordes of citizens who swarmed in were massacred by military robots. Such evacuationshelters were a form of extreme egoism, built all over the world, burrowed into the underground, as humans awaited the day the ice melts.

And so, a hundred years passed.

"—This is basically the truth to the 'End Times'. This 'Snow White' here is built as an evacuation shelter."

The hard hitting words continues to linger. I feel my leg wobble, that I may fall over at any moment.

"Humans are ugly. Humans are foolish. Humans are cruel. Humans—"

Chief looks over at the 'button'.

"Should be wiped out."

"...B-bu-but!"

I snatch the switch, and hold it in my clutches.

"W-we robots, ar-are all created by masters. So, our mission is to protect our masters—"

“The ones who massacred those masters are in that Snow White.”

“U…”

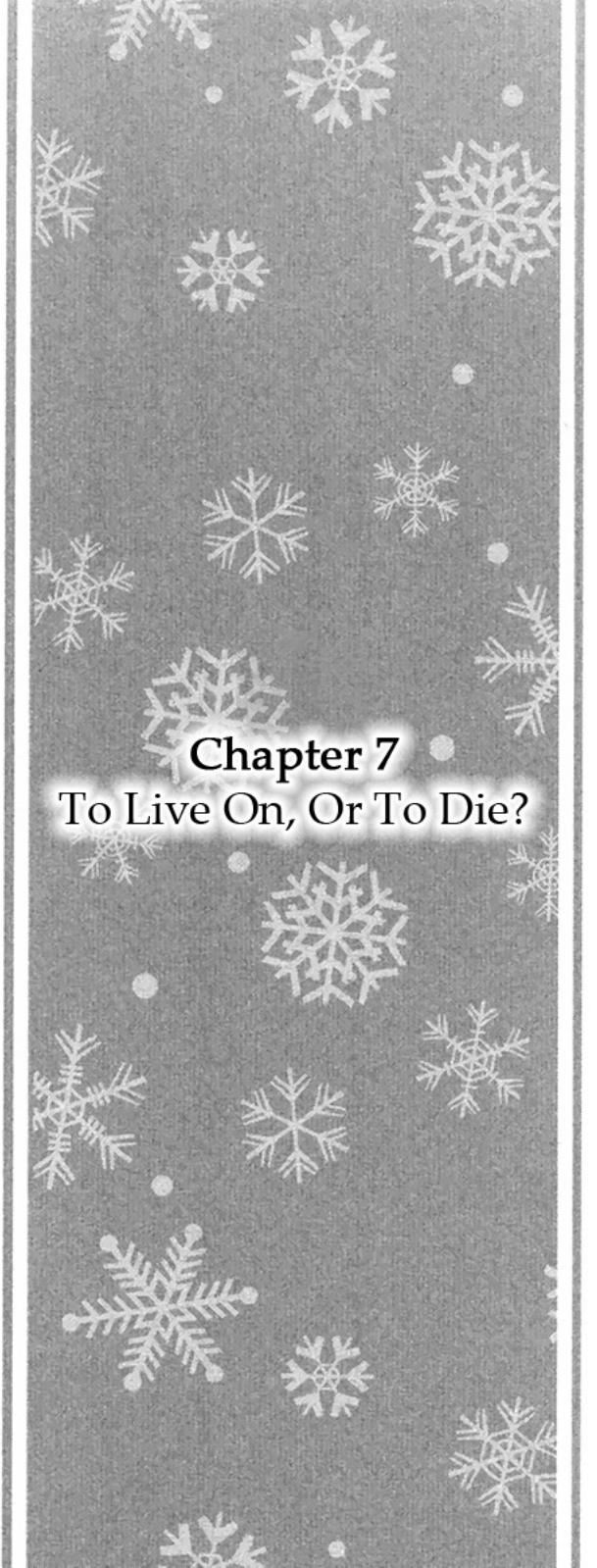
“The ones sleeping comfortably in there are not our masters, but vile beasts who killed off all our murders. Forget about the past; from now on, there is no need for any sacrifices from the villagers.”

Stopping here, Chief looks up to see our reactions.

While we’re still too shocked and unable to say anything, Chief mutters a summation, “Next week, we shall have a Village Meeting. I shall reveal the truth to everyone, and everyone shall decide if we are to press this button. You should prepare yourself here.”

The conversation ends.

Chief rolls his head away, and leave; left behind before us is the button giving off a faint red light.



Chapter 7
To Live On, Or To Die?

Chapter 7 – To Live On, Or To Die?

It was a bombshell.

Upon learning of the Village Meeting, all three hundred and so villagers were stunned, and protests were launched at the Village Council Hall. It was an unprecedented topic involving 'the survival of humanity', so it's to be expected that there would be such a reaction.

But the blame subsided in an instant. Once the people saw that 'footage' on the screen before the Hall, there was shock, hatred, followed by an immediate disappointment and confusion. After the footage ended, and hearing the Chief's explanation, he villagers who were marching on in protests returned back, completely stunned. The rumors of the 'footage' quickly spread amongst the Villagers. Over the first three days, viewership has been at 99%.

The Senate Council had divided views over whether this footage should be shown to the children. But as the children had offered their bodies and were 'extracted', the conclusion was made that they had the right to know. Of the children who participated in the viewing, there were a few who were wailing, yelling.

Thus, practically all the villagers had watched the footage, and the village was covered in a heavy atmosphere. The villagers went from shock and fear to lamenting, and disappointment, and then bitterness. "Everything for our masters' sake." "Everything else doesn't matter as long as our masters can wake up again"—That trust that has been supporting their devotion, their hard work, was shattered overnight like glass. It's no wonder that there would be such a reaction.

However, the time to judge continued to approach without mercy. There was only a week till the Village Council meeting, and the villagers who were startled are now forced to decide 'what stance are we going to have for this meeting'?' To continue 'extracting' from our bodies and the children's bodies for our masters' sakes, or to sacrifice

our masters and abandon our way of life.

Of course, to the villagers who have devoted their all for our masters till this point, it's definitely not easy to think of an answer. Everyone had been asking their neighbors to be sure of their answer, but the answers are all similar frustrations like "I don't know." "I'm confused too." Such troubles were shared, and the villagers were cornered. Given that the adults were like this, the children could only spend every day with fear and trepidation on their faces.

And so, that morning comes.

—Haa...

And so, I crawl into my bed at home on the day.

The Village Meeting's about to start in the day. Even after a week, I still can't make up my mind.

The topics to be discussed at the Village Meeting can be roughly classified into two parts.

1. Proposal to have humans survive... to continue to maintain and manage the 'Snow White'.
a. However, there are some duties all villagers will have to do.
i. Double the frequency of 'extracting'.
ii. Cut down supplies frequency by half.
iii. Stop all parts exchange during the diagnosis.

2. Proposal to have humans wiped out... to stop the 'Snow White', and destroy humanity.
a. From thus on, all villagers will have the following benefits.
i. Stop 'extracting'.
ii. Double the frequency of parts.
iii. Issue standard parts for treatment.

The contents of the meeting is just that simple.

Given the dire lack of parts, there's no way to continue maintaining

the Snow White from thus on except for more ‘extractions’ from the villagers. In other words, if we are to continue protecting humanity, the villagers will have to die. Conversely, if we protect the villagers, humans will have to die.

—Ahh.

I’m tormented by this cruelty.

To protect with our lives, or to live by killing?

—Why did it end up this way?

Is it worth protecting humans by sacrificing the wives?

Do we want to have humans continue to survive, even if it means sacrificing the children we love?

But if we destroy the Snow White here, what is the purpose of the past hundred years.

In any case, we robots, created by humans, have to judge over our makers; is this really forgivable?

—What do I do?

Over the past week, I had been asking this question to myself.

“Haa...”

I sigh for the umpteenth time for the day, and turn around. I finally make it back to my room, but I just can’t calm down.

To let them live on, or to wipe them out—which option do I choose? And, the reason behind it.

Of course, I do want to choose ‘Proposal to have humans survive’. Over the past hundred years, I have been living for that, moving on with the goal to serve our masters again. Just thinking of giving up on my prior way of life, and destroy the Snow White is something I

am terrified to think about.

—But.

There are two problems to this. One, the maintenance of the Snow White requires a large amount of sacrifice. If we continue to carry out extraction at this rate, the number of martyrs in the village will continue to increase. Having more cave-ins will also result in more sacrifices. Even if we do choose to remain in the village and protect the Snow White, that will mean a slow approach to our deaths, and there's a very high chance that the villagers will die off before the end of the Ice Age.

Second, which the Chief did mention, is the reason why we worked so hard to protect our masters. The people asleep inside the Snow White are the ones who sacrificed a large number of their kind to survive. Are they really the judge masters worthy of our loyalty, the masters as kind as the Principal? Are they the enemies of our masters, the ones who sacrificed them? Even so, to destroy the Snow White and kill off the masters who cannot resist is too—

—Ahh, seriously...!

I continue to rack my Mind Circuit, unable to consolidate my thoughts. If this kept up, I wouldn't be able to speak up at the meeting today.

Almost all the villagers will be attending the meeting, save for a few who are being repaired. Like me, the rest aren't able to get a conclusion, so the scale remains tipped in an unknown direction. If this keeps up, the possibility of the Chief's proposal—the Proposal to wipe out humans—being passed will be very high, given that he has the most trust from the villagers. Also, I lack the reasoning and resolution to refute that.

"Yo, coming in now."

The door opens without a knock. Poking her face in is my big sister, wearing a beret.

“What’s with the long face? That’ll ruin that cute face of yours.”

“But…”

My heart just feels heavy thinking about what’s going to happen today.

“What will you choose, Viscaria?”

“I think I’ll vote to wipe them out.”

I suddenly lift my head.

“Oh, you’re surprised? I do have some reservations about it, but considering how bad the predicament of the village is at this point.”

“Predicament…”

The lack of villagers’ parts is at its limit. If we continue extracting at this rate, there will surely be many more villagers who will stop functioning due to a lack of parts—death.

“What will you say for your speech?”

“Of course. I’ll say this, we villagers will be wiped out due to a lack of parts. As the lead technician, I support the proposal to wipe out humanity.”

“I see…”

Everyone can say whatever they want for today’s Meeting, if they want to. This affects the future of the village, and our own futures. Of course, I too have a chance to speak up.

She then continues on,

“I can’t stand seeing the lives that can be saved vanish before my eyes…”

Such a grumble is befitting of her, a technician and a doctor. If the

Snow White is broken into parts, we might be able to save a hundred. She knows this more than anyone else.

"That's what I think too. If the Snow White can't work, it means it's at the end of its lifespan. Even if we do continue to take care of her for a hundred years, if the Ice Age doesn't end, the fate of human extinction won't change either."

Viscaria states it very clearly. At such moments, she has an outstanding ability to make decisions.

"But we worked hard for our masters until this point, right?"

"I know. But aren't the ones sleeping inside that Snow White the bad ones who killed our masters? It's their fault that the surface entered the Ice Age."

"This…"

"The 'masters' I love and respect are the ones who really treasure the robots, and will continue to repair them no matter how many times it is, until the moment the robots break down, and say 'thank you very much for all this time'. When I was in the repair factory, I had so many kind people around me. My masters aren't inside the Snow White, but in my memories."

Saying this, Viscaria presses her chest.

She's straightforward, but there's a lot of gloominess on her face, and as she bites her lips, her expression is somewhat pained. I know this is a conclusion she has made after much pondering, so I have no intention to refute.

"Well, it just has to be a choice to make after much consideration. I can't say either of the choices are completely correct."

"Actually—"

She lowers her beret, and mutters a wish, a prayer.

“It’ll be best if there’s a chance for both humans and robots to be saved.”

Viscaria leaves, and I still remain gloomy.

There’s only half a day until the Village Meeting. While it’s not necessary to state my view at the Meeting, as a villager, and as the Vice Chief, I want to treat this matter responsibly. I really hate voting for the majority or going along with the others.

—I’ll choose to wipe them out. To destroy the Snow White.

Viscaria had stated clearly. This is a decision befitting of her, and I don’t think there’s anything wrong with that.

—To stop the ‘Snow White’, and destroy humanity.

The Snow White uses the latest parts, so once it’s taken down, it will instantly solve the issue of a lack of parts in the village. Visea’s ‘popping pain’ can be treated immediately, old man Sugi[3] can walk freely, Leaves can make voices from the throat, and Pinetree can see the light of day again. All the villagers who have done extraction can regain their original functions, whether it is that their limbs are immobile, or that they are blind or deaf; the village will probably regain its joy and life. This isn’t selfishness from the villagers, but instead, just taking back ‘what originally belongs to us’. The villagers who have been protecting the Snow White for more than a hundred years have the right to live on, so I think.

—But.

Is it really fine? To abandon what we have been protecting with all our lives, and to ensure our survival? Our masters created us from one; are we just going to let them die? There are babies inside too. Are we going to treat them equally? Then, are we going to just save the babies? Just save the ones who never participated in the ‘massacre’? Choose them one by one? Do we have such a right?

The more I think, the more confused I get.

And at the end of the frustrations, that voice will always show up in my mind.

—Good work.

That's the Principal who often took care of me when I was still a nanny robot.

—Go have a rest.

The Principal has always been thinking for my sake, comforting me with words from time to time. Even after becoming an old man, even after his back is slouched, his hands trembling, Principal always have an earnest smile on his face. Principal's popular with the children, surrounded by them immediately once he appears. When I broke down, Principal objected to scrapping me, and had me repaired. To me, the original image of the 'master' is the kind face inside the bedroom, with the curtains fluttering in the spring breeze.

—Principal...what, shall I do?

Principal's kind smile continues to linger inside my Mind Circuit. Over the past hundred years, I kept working for that smile, protecting the Snow White. For that, I have no regrets or grudges, and am I am proud of it.

Principal's kind smile, the children's innocent sleeping faces, the amicable mothers—such memories of the era of nanny robots can't be wiped away at all, and I find it hard to make a decision. There are two ends of the scale. One side is the nice sleeping faces of the children in the village, and the other is the innocent sleeping faces of the kindergarten children. The scale continues to shake, not tilting to either side.

—It'll be best if there's a chance for both humans and robots to be saved.

Viscaria's right. If there's such a way, that's definitely the best one. But because we can't do it, we're troubled, lost till this point. It's not

like this fantasy of a solution is there whenever we want it.

"Ahh, every problem will be solved if the Ice Age can end."

I continue to say something that isn't possible, and feel increasingly downhearted.

And so, after thirty minutes of me being busy over nothing passed.

—Wait.

I lift my face.

—If the Ice Age ends.

The reason why the Snow White was built was because the surface was unsuitable for humans to live on. So, there's a need to wait until the Ice Age ends, and have the Cradle return to the surface to be 'reawakened'. That will become a new dawn for humanity. Right, if the Ice Age ends—

—Huh?

At that moment, I get up with an idea.

—How's the situation on the surface?

Once I realize this possibility, the electric signals race through my Mind Circuit. Sparks fly everywhere, and the shattered information start to piece together as a whole. This is a phenomenon called 'realization' in humans.

—Such cracks appear when there is a difference in temperatures.

There are some strange cracks appearing on the icemobile. Back then, Viscaria said,

—Maybe it's because the recent difference in temperatures causing it. I intend to focus on Treating frostbites during the next 'body checkups'.

There has been a sharp increase in the number of frostbite cases. Back then, the one who was told of the ‘difference in temperature’ wasn’t anyone else, but me.

Difference in temperature.

In other words, that’s the change in temperature—if the temperature ‘underground’ changes, does it mean that the temperature on the ‘surface’ is changing too?

—Right.

It’s an optimistic guess. Even if this is an illusion born out of my wish, called ‘I hope so’, but at this point, I, who’s at a complete loss, thinks of this as a great idea. Even if it’s a roll on the dice, there’s value in going to check it out.

“Alright!”

I stand up, grab my coat, and run out of the house.

—To the surface!

After that.

I stand at the top of the spindle, looking up. There is a heavy door above me, giving off a dim glow.

—Chief will be angry after learning of this.

Using the identification key I obtained from the Chief’s room, I open the door. With a blunt rumble, the door slides open, and the shattered ice drops.

—The passage does eem fine here.

On the other side of the thick door, there is a path that leads high above. This manhole-like path is called the ‘Path Canal’, left behind when the Snow White sank deep into the ground. It’s the mission of the village to send the Cradle through this Path Canal when the snow

melts. The purpose of sending three hundred and so robots underground is to provide manual labor for transporting the three hundred or so Cradles in the final phase.

—What will Viscaria say…?

I never mentioned anything about heading to the surface. Normally, I'll discuss this alone with Viscaria, but this time, I won't.

— I think I'll vote to wipe them out.

My hope to have humans continue to survive will definitely clash with her. She'll definitely suffer because of this. So, I have to finish this on my own—so I think.

—Right, let's get going!

I reach my hand out for the ladder, and start to climb out.

An endless darkness.

I slowly climb up this really dark 'Path Canal'. My visual installation can only light up several meters away, so it does feel like I'm slowly floating up in the deep sea.

—In fact, how might it be?

The remote thermometer that records the surface temperature has been broken for more than thirty years. As long as the Ice Age hasn't ended, just changing it will only be a waste of precious parts, so at this point, we left it alone.

—The problem here is the 'power generator'.

There's a generator on the surface. Thousands of robots were deployed when the Snow White was created, and the generator was the facility. If I can get the generator working, and we return back to the surface to live—and most importantly, to ensure the vitals of our masters. It will be very possible. I can't do anything in this Ice Age,

but as long as the temperature returns to normal, there's hope.

—If possible, I want to try getting the generator to work again.

Harboring such faint hopes, I climb up the dark Path Canal. This hole, ten meters in diameter, has ice everywhere, and the ladder surface is completely frozen. It's hard to proceed on as I have to scrape the layer of ice and move on, but I can't be jumpy. If I slip and fall in this situation without a safety rope, even a robot like me will be broken into pieces at this massive height.

So I climb on quietly, and after climbing a little while.

An obstacle suddenly appear before me.

–Ugh...

Waiting for me there is a thick wall of ice.

The Path Canal gets narrower, and the diameter is already less than five meters, and the ice blocks the path like a stopper. It looks like it was formed by underground water that had seeped through and froze.

"This is troublesome huh..."

Anyway, I first take out a tool similar to a torchlight, and approach the ice block like a dentist shining light into a patient's mouth. Once the light hits the light, the ice vaporizes with a whoosh. This is a tool called the 'Black Pointer', the official name called 'Portable Directional Heat Wave Aiming Device'. This works on the same principle as the 'Little Sun', and is a 'heating flashlight'.

—This is endless...

I stop what I'm doing, looking lost. It's regrettable to give up here, but it is a waste of time to melt the ice with the equipment I have,

"This is troublesome huh..."

I open the map in my Mind Circuit. The Path Canal extends straight up from the “REM Forest’. It’s a clear path, but because of this, it becomes a dead end when blocked.

—And I can’t just dig my way through here…

I activate the holographic map inside my Mind Circuit. Like a windmill, the map rolls about in the Mind Circuit.

—Eh?

After that, I realize something.

On this map that I just so happen to check on, there’s are thins line that shows up after I enlarged it. The branch-like lines extend from the Path Canal, in a radial manner. They look like an ant hive with a complex structure.

“Work, tunnels?”

I look at a brief explanation on the map, and it has a tagline ‘for moving sand and dirt’ behind.

—Just maybe…!

A hundred years ago, the Snow White was buried deep underground. In order to build such a large facility, there needs to be a large amount of dirt and rocks dug up. In that case, are these the work tunnels used to transport the dirt?

—Proof is more important than theory.

I follow the directions indicated on the map, and descend the ladder by a little. After about five meters or so, I gather my focus on the surrounding walls. If my guess is correct, it should be nearby—

“Got it!”

I find a spot with a slightly different color on the frozen wall. This is a little gradient that isn’t easily noticed if I don’t observe up close, and

it is a two meter diameter on the wall. Just as how there are 'traces' left behind when something is buried underground, there are such marks here.

—No doubt about it. There is such a tunnel here. A work tunnel used for moving the excavated dirt and rubble.

I pull out the 'Black Pointer' torchlight from my pocket, holding onto the ladder as I cautiously melt the border with the contrasting color. After I etch out a circle.

"Heeeeyyy!!"

I kick at the wall. The wall fall to the other side with a thud, forming a pretty round hole.

—As I expected...!

Opened right before me is a tunnel that appears to swallow all darkness.

Right, right, left, up, left, a little down, and up again.

I continue to advance wordlessly in this tunnel that's as complex as a labyrinth.

I ignore the little paths that appear to be dug up randomly, and choose the direction with lots of light, using all my efforts as I advance forward. Till this point, the locations match the map completely, so I should be in the right direction.

—But even so.

I seem to have stepped on something, and hastily raise my leg.

"Uu..."

I just stepped on a broken hand. Lying beside it is a body that was shattered due to frostbite. The head lying by the side of the body is staring at the road, wide-eyed, like a really poor sculpture. This is the

corpse of a robot.

—This is the sixth one.

Every five minutes I pass through the tunnel, I will come across a robot corpse. Obviously, it isn't hard to think of them as the work robots deployed to build the Snow White.

"...Is this one a lost cause too?"

Feeling lucky, I open the robot's chest to check on the condition. Unfortunately, like the five units before it, the Mind Circuit had shattered due to it being in the last stages of frostbite, and was unfortunate not to survive.

Ssssst, ssst, the sound of dried sand as it shatters, and the image resonates that with Gappy's death. A sad emotion tugs hard at my chest.

—Sorry that I wasn't able to save you.

They didn't enter an evacuation shelter, they didn't enter the village, and ran out of power. What did the robots feel when they died off? I was coincidentally chosen as a villager, and there's nothing strange even if I'm to die wordlessly here like them. My Mind Circuit had been modified before, and I have no idea what happened before, so maybe these robots before me were comrades who suffered along with me.

"I'm really sorry."

I apologize as I step across the hill of buried corpses that filled the tunnels.

The frozen corpses shatter like ice pillars.

And after a while.

—Huh?

I stop in my tracks to listen. It's feeble, but there seems to be the sound of a wind instrument being played.

—Wind?

I sense something, and hasten myself.

I continue to climb up, and start to firmly believe. The wind blowing through the ice cave is definitely coming from the outside.

—it's close...!

I follow the sound, and finally find a large hole. I try to advance as much as possible, but the path becomes narrow, and black dirt blocks my path.
—Nothing I can do...?

I check the map, and the line ends here. This is originally a path that leads to the surface, but it is buried by the large amount of dirt. At this point, I can't advance.

"This is troublesome, huh..."

If I have to look for another road here, I will have to make a long detour back.

There's still another fifteen minutes until the meeting.

—I can't make it in time if I take the same route back. But...

Even if I can't reach the surface, as long as I can be sure that there's sunlight—that'll be proof that the surface is warming up. After that, I'll just take a photo of a place with sunlight, determine the temperature, and that'll be enough material to show everyone at the Meeting.

But unlike what I have assumed, the tunnel is still filled with darkness. Even though I have the night vision installation at full power, I can only move forward carefully, and I can't detect a trace

of sunlight.

—So all for nothing?

I sit on the dirt, and sigh. It's so close, but accordingly to the map, there's still a hundred meters. It's impossible to dig my way through.

—This is bad.

In another ten minutes, the Meeting will start. Those led by the Chief will strongly insist on wiping out humanity. Viscaria too will join in. In this case, the Meeting will end up—

"Ugh…!"

I slam my fist into the dirt. Let's just return to the village instead of going so far. In that case, there's still a chance to speak up at the Meeting. No, maybe I can still make it if I head back immediately.

—Guess I can only head back now.

I grit my teeth, and make the decision to retreat. Since the tunnel is blocked, I can't move forward, and the only option left is to retreat. I still have some hope if I have another half day, so I thought, but unfortunately, time won't return.

I stand up, and pat my cheeks with both hands.

And then, I start running at full speed. The tunnel direction is already locked in my Mind Circuit, so it's easy for me to return. I return back at double the speed, as though I'm challenging the darkness.

—I got to hurry back.

I haven't told anyone that I came here. I guess not many will realize that I'm not present, and even if they do, it's unlikely that Chief will delay the Meeting. At this point, I am a hindrance to the Chief.

I have to hurry back before the Meeting ends—so I thought as I run down the dark tunnel.

—!

And I immediately slip.

“Wahhh!!”

As it’s too sudden, I’m unable to fall over properly, and even worse, I trip over at a slope. I tumble down for dozens of meters, tumbling around.

“Ugh…”

A sharp pain races through my body. I exert my strength in my arms, trying to support my upper body. My body feels hurt.

—Ahh.

More than the pain, I’m shivering in regret. I was moving forward towards the surface with a hint of hope, but not only was I unable to reach the surface, I’m unable to return. I feel anxious as I fail to accomplish anything, and I feel momentarily limp in the face of my own incompetence.

At this moment.

—H-huh…?

As I recover, I see a complete white before my eyes . I assume that the visual installation has malfunction, but my vision recovers little by little. I guess my automated calibration functions didn’t match due to the sudden light. Such a phenomenon is called dizziness by humans.

—Are my eyes…dizzy?

I turn around, and look up.

“Ah.”

There’s a large hole there. It’s a large crevice—a long and narrow ridge on the landscape, seemingly carved by a blade, and I’m able to look up from the bottom due to this.

The sky.

The light shining down from the sky is undoubtedly—

Sunlight.

“Ah, ah…”



I eke out a voice. A glimmer of hope that I had given up on cast away the darkness of despair, shining upon me.

Such a warm light.

The artificial skin senses the change in temperature, and it brings me greater

0.2 degrees.

This is a temperature so cold, humans will shiver in. However, to me, who have lived underground, below zero for more than a hundred years, this light feels so warm to me.

“Ahh…”

I spread myself wide, basking in the sunlight.

“The sun, feels so warm…”

I sink in the sea of data, as the memories of the sun has awakened after a long time. It’s the light I feel in the nap room of the kindergarten, the sunlight shining vaguely through the gaps of the leaves and the curtains. The feeble sunlight shining into the underground feel so similar to that.

—Now then, I got to hurry…!

After enjoying the sunlight I have experienced after a hundred years, I cover the antennas of the ears with my hands.

“This is Amaryllis!”

I call out through the wireless.

“Please responds, this is Amaryllis…!

There’s still another five minutes until the meeting starts. It’s impossible for me to be punctual, but I can share the good news to the villagers through the wireless. The visual of the sun, and the

temperature that's above the freezing point. These aren't scientific proofs, but just describing this possibility should be enough to convince them. The villagers should be able to understand now.

"Do you hear me...!? This is Amaryllis...! Anyone! Please answer...! Eisbahn! Götz! Viscaria! Chief!"

But no matter how many times I try, I get no answer.

—Wh-what do I do now...

Is it because the output is weak, or that there's some problem with the electromagnetic base station is malfunctioning. In any case, I have nothing in the wireless, not even static. One minute, two minutes, three minutes. Time passes by for nothing. If only I can ask Viscaria in such a situation—even if I do, it's pointless.

—Ehhh!!

I sit upright.

If I can't connect through, I'll just have to go back and tell them personally, don't I? Anyway, it's likely that I'll get a signal somewhere on the way back to the village. Anyway, staying here is a waste of time. This can't do.

But.

"U..."

The moment I stand up, I feel a sharp pain in my leg. I look, and find that my right foot has been twisted in another direction.

—You're kidding...!?

I frantically check the damage, and found that the parts at the joints have been severed, stabbing into the artificial skin. The oil is oozing from the wound, giving off sparks.

—Ugh...

I haven't noticed the damage till now, as it was so severe that my pain installation was cut off automatically. However, I'm a little confused as to why a siren hasn't rang. Is this a side effect of the 'extraction'?

In any case, I start my emergency repairs. I take out some chemical fibers and tape from my pocket, and bandage my ankle.

This should be okay. Having such a thought, I stand up.

"Ugh."

And then, I kneel over. The damaged area seems to be worse off than I have expected, and just the leakage and overheating is already abnormal.

—Ugh...!

I try standing up without care for my own injury. Every step I take, my leg will twist to a side, giving off a creaking sound. I open my arms wide, trying to maintain my balance, but I can't increase my speed. This requires me to spend more time than I did wandering around.

I check the time; the Meeting's about to start soon.

—Seriously! Why do I have to break down at this moment!

I curse myself as I advance forward, dragging my injured leg forward. My ankle's heating up, and at this rate, I might have to be scrapped. Who cares about such things now, anyway, got to keep moving forward—

At this moment.

Pack, a sound rings. Ah, I look down at my ankle, and see it bent as I fall down. My face lands on the ground, and my antenna numbs; electric currents run all over my body, and I can't exert strength.

“U, ahh…”

I short-circuited.

My body cringes from time to time, and it heats up.

—Ku,uu…ugh!

I remain face down on the ground, trying my best to break the deadlock. No matter how I struggle however, my short circuit just can’t recover.

I know the reasons. The direct reasons are that my ankle is faulty, and the short circuit caused by the hit. Indirect reasons is because my body deteriorated from the ‘extracting’, or that this robot called Amaryllis Alstroemeia is already completely fatigued.

—Reboot system! Restart, restart…!

Normally, the way to deal with this is to first shut down the functions and start up again, but for some reason, even restarting here hasn’t shown much effort. Is this a side effect of extraction too?

—Ahh, uu.

The silver lining here is that the Mind Circuit doesn’t appear to be having too many issues, and my consciousness remain awake. However, it’s because I’m conscious that I’m anxiously commanding myself “Restart! Recover! Reboot!”

Time passes, and my anxiety reaches its limits. And to add fuel to the fire, ‘that’ started’.

Such words comes coldly from the wireless,

“—Everyone, please be seated. I repeat, please be seated.”

It’s Cattleya’s voice.

—Eh? This is…

Whenever there's a major activity in the village, she'll be the one hosting. At this moment, she's reading a certain message.

"We have ended questioning, but it does not mean that we are limiting any chance to speak up; instead, it is about sorting out the order. Anyone willing can repeat their words as many times as possible, though all questioning has ended —"

There's no doubt that it's the telecast signal for the Village Meeting. It's basically everyone participating, but there are some who can't be there as they have to be repaired, and they too can receive real-time voice and visual. It seems my wireless just so happened to have picked up on this.

Naturally, I start shouting—with the voice of my heart.

—Please answer! This is Amaryllis...! Please answer...!

But nobody answers my call. No matter how many times I call out, there's no response, only the voices of Cattleya and the villagers. It seems I've only received the voices, unable to convey my own voice to them. This is no different from the prior broadcast.

Time passes on mercilessly, seemingly nudging at my anxious emotions. I'm unable to move, only able to listen to the voices.

And then, finally—

"The Emergency Village Meeting shall now begin."

The fated Meeting begins.

"First, may we have Chief Chamomile begin with the topic at hand."

Cattleya's voice rings, and the place turns silent. Then, Chief's voice follows.

“Please allow me to express my utmost thanks to all of you, for making this long journey here.”

The raspy voice enters my wireless. At this point, surely the Chief’s head is looking down at the villagers who have completely filled the seats.

“I shall again state the reasons why I support the preposition to wipe out humanity. Basically, this meeting—”

With a heavy tone, Chief starts rattling off the reasons for organizing this meeting. However, the Senate has already informed all villagers, and this is just an affirmation.

The Meeting will be held three phases, ‘state the topic’, ‘floor discussion’, and ‘voting’. During the second phase, each person has about three minutes to speak, but as it’s just a rough estimate, anyone can continue to talk even if they do exceed the time; also, there are opportunities to add on or correct their words. There’s no special rule to the end of the meeting, and the discussion will continue until everyone is convinced. Only when no one else wants to speak will the voting phase begin. Of course, all the villagers, from the children to the adults have the right to speak up, and the right to vote. At this point, there are three hundred and seven villagers, so more than half of that number is a hundred and fifty forth. Also, besides the preposition to wipe out humanity or to let them live, the villagers can add new prepositions for voting as they please.

“—These are the reasons why we have the preposition to wipe out humanity. I hope everyone will actively participate in the discussions.”

Chief, who could normally rattle on for at least an hour if left unchecked, only spoke for three minutes today. The serious tone and business-like mannerism seemed to have conveyed the tension in the arena. The ‘switch’ that can stop the Snow White from running is placed on the stage, and Chief’s explanation ended.

Following this, it’s the time for floor discussion.

“Now, we shall begin the time for discussion. The first speaker is—”

Cattleya’s voice echoes, and states the name of the first speaker,

“I am speaking with the hope to support that humans will continue to live. As we all know, our mission is to protect our masters. It is true that I was really shocked when I saw that footage at the Council Hall. However, to everyone who is seated, please calm and think, over the past hundred years, we’ve—”

(Hydra Gien/ Homemaker Robot/ Operation time, a hundred and fifty three years/ ‘Body’ B block)

The first speaker supports the preposition to have humans survive. The reason is simple; the reason for our existence as robots is to protect our masters, and this too shall never change. That footage was an exceptional situation, something that had to be done.

“—This shall be all I have to say.”

This speech lasts for exactly three minutes. There’s neither applause nor boos as the audience quietly listen.

—That’s right, that’s right.

I remain lying on the ground, my body unable to move as I empathize with what was said.

—Protecting our masters is our mission.

“Next, number two, please.”

And as Cattleya instructs, the second speaker steps onto the stage.

“Over the past week, I have been thinking about this over and over again. Unfortunately, till this point, I still have yet to have an answer, so I shall hold back on what I have to

say…I too have seen that footage, and I too was shocked, for I always believed in our masters. Even till now, I still have doubts on the validity of the visual. The masters who have given me much care are all very kind. But if that footage was real, and everything was as Chief said—"

(Robbie Dantrum/Heavy Construction Robot/ Operation time, a hundred and twenty six years/ 'Right Foot' D block)

The second speaker honestly admits his 'doubts'. After brooding and being frustrated over this, he's still unable to make up his mind, so he chooses to 'forfeit'

"Now then, Speaker number three—"

The discussion continues. There's a lot of different content, but everyone admits to the pain in their heart. It seems most have talked about seeking help, and most of the opinions are 'to keep the vote'. Even amongst those who supported 'to let humans continue to live', most were pessimistic, saying 'it's better to maintain the status quo' instead of enthusiastically declaring that humans should live.

Thirty minutes pass.

My body is still unable to move, but I continue to listen in on the Meeting. At this moment, ten villagers have finished what they have to say, and seven chose to 'keep their vote', three chose to 'have humans continue to live'. Nobody has yet to vote for 'wiping out humans'.

Ahh, at the very least, the preposition to wipe our humans probably won't be picked up—so I heave a sigh of relief.

But,

"Number Eleven, please."

The next one stepping onto the stage radically changes the direction of the Meeting.

“Viscaria Acanthus. —I am in support of *wiping out humanity*”

The arena is silent.

Not only is it because we finally have the first one who agrees with ‘wiping out humanity’, but more importantly, the one saying this is ‘her’.

A Senator, the best mechanic in the village, the chief doctor, and the big sister I trust in.

“The reason is simple. First, please look at this.”

Viscaria stops her speech, and pauses for a while as she seems to be waiting for something. She’s probably waiting for the screen on the stage to show the something.

“Eh, this is the number of people I have diagnosed. This is the number of times extraction has been done. And this i”

She continues to show the data, and smoothly explain the situation. With a nonchalant tone, she conveys the dire topic, as per her usual style.

“Simply put, if the proposal to have humans live on passes through, there will be ten robots dying a year.”

It’s buzzing out there.

“This is just an optimistic number, but if there are more cave-in or severe frostbites, this number will probably increase to twice or thrice that. Also, in the second year, the number of dead will increase in numbers, so in other words, there probably will be a hundred dead in five years. Such developments isn’t really something that can be taken lightly.”

Her explanation remain based on data, but it’s because of this that

she's really convincing.

"Having treated everyone till this point, I do feel that you all have done enough, and let your bodies be so ruined for the sake of the Snow White…but I think it is time to change that. We have fought for more than a hundred years, and it's time to put down the burden we carry."

There's silence again in the arena as everyone listen intently on Viscaria's words,

"To prevent others from misunderstanding what I have to say, I will preface that no matter what the chosen outcome is, I will not give up on my mission. If the proposal to wipe out humanity is denied, I will continue to do my best to treat everyone or repair the Snow White. I will never allow myself to reject treating others just because our viewpoints clash. I just want to have everyone know from an objective viewpoint, and the demerits to allowing humans to continue living…that is all from me."

Once she stops, the arena's buzzing. Those views seem exceptionally clear to that have chosen to forfeit their votes or leave for later judgement.

"Then, number twelve."

Cattleya calls out for the next person.

And so, the Meeting changed in direction.

"Actually, I…do support wiping out humanity."

It feels like a dam is burst.

After that, there's a clear decline in number of people who clearly voice their support for 'humanity to continue surviving', while those supporting 'wiping out humanity' have increased in numbers. Just a moment ago, everyone was unwilling to say such a guilty thing, to

not ‘wipe out humanity’, but once Viscaria Acanthus, a prominent person in the village, helped give a nudge, it seemed there was an atmosphere where they can all say whatever they want.

“I have lost my vision. If possible, I want to look at everyone’s faces again. If I can obtain proper parts, I will be able to see the light of day again. Please allow me to regain my parts from the Snow White.”

“Our child here can’t move the legs. My parts can’t get him moving. But, if the parts from the Snow White are available, this child will be able to walk again. Please, allow this child to.”

“My husband has been sleeping since twenty years ago. If the parts from the Snow White are available.”

Due to ‘extraction’, the villagers lost parts of their bodies, unable to move their limbs freely, started to worry about their families health, or lost their lovers. There are all kinds of thoughts expressed, but the villagers convey all their wishes, and have a common mindset. Sobbing can be heard from the arena, and even I, listening from far away, can’t help but feel the same as I think of the suffering everyone feels.

Once thirty people finish their speech, a break is called at the meeting.

At this point, the atmosphere at the arena is completely different from before. The side supporting the notion that humans are to live on has completely vanished, while more than half of them support wiping out humanity, increasingly riled up.

—This is bad.

Two hours have passed, and I remain short-circuited. I remain prone on the icy ground, tormented by anxiety and helplessness.

If this keeps up, the proposal to wipe out humanity will be passed.

Chief will press the ‘switch’ that’s prepared, and the Snow White will be ruined forever. By that time, it will be too late, and even if we do regret, we won’t be able to wake up our masters again. I finally managed to find a third route where both humans and robots can coexist—

—Move...!

I pray, I earnestly pray.

—Move, my body!

Restart, force stop, emergency reset, insert backup work-in—I tried every single method, but my body is unable to react.

My consciousness fades from time to time. Whenever a short-circuit longs for a long time, I’ll be forced to shut off all functions in order to protect the Mind Circuit. If that happens, everything will be for naught. The path where humans and robots can work together to survive, and move into the future; that will disappear forever.

—Ahh.

The world before my eyes get increasingly darken.

—Time...ah, ah.

My visual installation is forcefully shut down, and I’m unable to see anything. The end is near.

The voices from the arena become increasingly distant. Someone is calling for humanity to be wiped out. That voice becomes increasingly fleeting, and finally vanishes.

—No, this isn’t it...listen to me, everyone. We, don’t have to fight, like that...at...all...

The moment my consciousness blacks out,

I see a light.

A blue light shines in the bottom of the darkness, and the sand before my eyes crumble.

—What?

I sense a figure opposite the sand appear before me, and my consciousness is cut off.

My consciousness remains blurry, groggy as though I'm in a dream, and I can only hear voices.

The meeting continues.

"Due to the aforementioned reasons, I wholeheartedly support wiping out humanity."

The meeting is now a countdown to wiping out humanity. The speakers have all become supportive to 'wipe out', and no other views have been expected.

I understand. It's true that Viscaria's words managed to change the course of the meeting, but it's just the initial drop. The villagers are in complete pain due to a lack of parts, like how every drip of water fills the cup, and at this moment, the emotions are overflowing in the arena like a flood.

It's because of this that the current direction isn't going to be changed easily. The damages self-sacrifices over the past hundred years have finally shown itself. 'The villagers' mission' 'the raison d'etre of the robots', such words clearly appear feeble before anyone.

"Is there anyone who will like to speak?"

Cattleya's voice rings again. There's silence in the arena, and nobody else raises their hand. This doesn't indicate that they have nothing to so, but that everyone already knew what's the outcome will be, and choose to remain silent.

—Is it, over...?

In this pitch dark world, in this world of voices, I feel an end to everything.

"Is there no one else who will say anything? If not, we shall end discussions and begin voting."

I don't want to give up, but there's no time already. As long as nobody else in the arena wants to say, the meeting will end. There will be voting, the preposition to wipe out will be chosen, the button will be pressed, the Snow White will forever cease, and humanity—our masters, will die off forever.

—Someone...

I mutter earnestly in my heart. My voice can't possibly reach out.

However,

"—Wait!"

Someone calls out.

There's a commotion in the arena. After a pause, there's a voice from the microphone of the stage.

"This is too weird! Everyone, everyone's acting weirdly!"

It's a young voice.

"Just a moment ago, everyone was so, so admiring of our masters! Everyone did their best! Practicing over and over again for the Festival! But why? Why change when we say change? Why is it that it doesn't matter even if our masters die!?"

With a childish pout, she continue to complain loudly,

"Hey, tell me! What about the past hundred years!? Every day, every day, we worked so hard for our masters, for what reason? For whose sake did we spend the last hundred years?

For what purpose did we spend the last hundred years? Didn't everyone have so many parts extracted? For whose sake did our comrades die for over the past hundred years!? If we destroy the Snow White here, isn't their deaths for nothing!? They didn't need to die, and they're die!? And, and, if we give up here—"

The girl's voice is trembling.

"Then for whose sake, did Gappy die for!?"

There's a loud thud. I can hear that it's the sound of the podium being stlammed.

The arena turns silent.

The girl's silent. And so is everyone. Even the host of the meeting, Cattleya is silent.

And I—system recover—standby—rebooting—time to functional recovery, thirty seconds—twenty seconds—ten seconds—five, four, three, two, one—

Reactivated.

I open my eyes. I stand up. And I walk on.

There's a girl standing on the stage, looking confused. It's the central stage, the arena for the Village Meeting. Once I show up, the arena burst into commotion. "It's Amaryllis...!" "Where have you been...!?" Everyone is giving me looks.

The girl speaking looks at me in shock, and I walk straight towards her.

"Sorry I'm late."

"Amaryllis..."

"You've worked hard, Daisy."

I reach my hand forward, petting her soft chestnut-colored hair. As I continue to pat, tears begin to well in the girl's eyes.

She buries her face into my chest, and then seem to remember something as she lifts her face.

"Amaryllis...are you going to support wiping out? Or letting them live?"

The uneasy eyes are shown in mine. And I smile, answering,

"Neither. If I have to say, halving?'

"Eh? Halving?'

"Yes, halving."

And then, I move forward, grab the microphone, and loudly declare,

"I have an emergency preposition!"

Emergency preposition..

This is a third option after the motion to 'wipe out humanity' and 'have humans keep living'—it's called the 'a preposition for both humans and robots to coexist'.

With everyone looking at me on the stage, I start to explain with confidence.

"Just a few hours ago, I went to check on the surface."

The arena is buzzing.

"This is the footage that serves as proof."

I show the image I saw of the surface on the stage screen. The sky after a hundred years, the warm sunlight, the warmth that's coming back. I convey all the data stored in my Mind Circuit, including the

corpses of the work robots I encountered along the way. I hope for humans and robots to coexist, and I feel that the most proper way to go about doing it is to reveal everything on the footage.

"As everyone knows, there is a large generator built on the surface. That's the facility used to provide power for work robots like everyone here when building the Snow White. If the surface temperature recovers, this means we can get this generator to restart. The power lines can then be assured, starting with the air conditioning, and the chances of us living together with our masters will be better than before."

The arena starts to explode in commotion. The villagers exchange looks, shaking as though they're rattled by my words.

Of course, there is opposition.

"If the generator can't work again, what do we do…?"

There's a sharp scathing voice from the front rows.

"If we do return to the surface, and it's still not working, then we're all doomed!? You dare say there's no problem!?'

"This is."

In the face of such a fiery question, I can't help but stammer. I can't say something irresponsible like 'no problems at all'.

At this moment.

"No problems! Not only do we have the main crystal furnace in that type of generator, we also have traditional sub-generators. The usual fossil fuel there should be enough! So don't worry!"

—Ah!

Shocked, I look over at the voice. There's a woman with red hair in the middle of the arena, standing there with a hand on her waist. She

exchange looks with me.

—Viscaria.

“We can get the generator running again. Leave this to me.”

She concludes decisively.

This relief from her has me really grateful. The man questioning me seem shocked by the unexpected counterargument, “Well, whatever, so…” and returns to his seat.

I then seize the opportunity to say,

“It’s true that I can’t be sure that it’ll definitely succeed. This plan needs a lot of labor, starting from the preparation phase. But please calm down and think about it. Even if we do stay in the village, we will end up ruined by another earthquake that may come. It’s not too late. Since we still have our batteries working till this point, this is the best chance to escape the village.”

I confidently narrate. The faces of the villagers are filled with life, and it gets increasingly cheery.

And before I end off my speech, I deal a ‘finishing blow’

“Everyone, before you came here, I suppose you have seen ‘that footage’, right? I too have seen it, and to be honest, I am really rattled. But,”

I take out a chip from my pocket, and raise it high enough for everyone to see. It’s a microchip the size of a little fingernail—a high end memory chip.

“That footage isn’t the only thin contained in this chip, It’s halfway saved, but there’s such a video inside.”

The footage is then aired on the screen.

It’s a footage of daily life.

First appearing is a tall, lanky woman. This woman with black flowing hair is seated on a bench, reading a book. Standing politely beside her is a girl. The girl is dressed in a maid outfit, and the antenna extending out from her ears clearly show that she's a robot.

The master, and the robot serving her. This is a common scene from far back.

The woman and robot rely on each other like sisters, reading the same book. The robot will give a few looks at the woman, or lean on the shoulder fawningly. Whenever this happens, the woman will smile gracefully, stop flipping the book, and lend the girl her shoulder.

This initial footage lasts for a minute or so, and then, the footage changes to another scene. It's the scene of a human and a robot working together in a certain small factory. The robot produce the goods, and the human inspect them. Once inspection is done, the human pats the robot on the shoulder in a consoling manner. Only when they leave the mini factory did the footage end. They're like intimiate brothers.

And so, such scenes change over and over again, the scenes of humans and robots living together, working together, helping each other out.

Every footage lasts less than a minute, and in all, it appears to be no more than fifteen minutes, without any sounds. Finally, there is the logo of the producer, showing that it's a promotional video used to promotion coexistence between humans and robots.

Perhaps it's made for show, that the footage are made for a certain purpose, or maybe it might be an idealization of humanity.

But despite this, the footage awakens the precious memories deep within our hearts. Humans will die one day, but robots won't die easily. The robots who lost their masters and were left behind experienced long memories that won't fade away, living on until they become scrapped metal.

Thus, the old memories remain piled inside the Mind Circuit, and they can be repeated over and over again without fading away. The clear sadness that can't be forgotten shall always remain etched in our chests.

Before I know it, everyone's crying. They recall the memories they spent with their masters, the memories that are as precious as gemstones.

I recall my time working in the kindergarten. The lively children, the earnestly mothers, and the amicable Principal.

I look back, and Viscaria is crying too. She probably recalls the superintendent of the automobile repair factory. That's the one she would reminisce from time to time, the when she would blush whenever she talked with. There's a barrier between humans and robots that can never be overcome, and they're unable to get together.

Götz too was crying. He must have been thinking of the director when he was still an actor. When he was about to be scrapped, the director kept him, and groomed him until he became famous, the benefactor.

The children too are crying. They recall their dead parents and the siblings they broke off with. To me, a nanny robot, I understand them really well.

All of them are dejected, lonely. They recall the blissful days they can never return to, their longing for masters filled are of such pain and destitute over the past hundred years, a time of enduring such loneliness. However, we don't hate this; instead, we enjoy the work heartily, offering our bodies. For we always have the dream of working together with our masters.

The footage ends.

I give a deep bow, and descend the podium.

Soon, Cattelya's voice rings.

“Is there anyone else who wants to say anything?”

Even Cattleya is crying. Surely she is thinking of her beloved husband.”

—Ah!

At this moment.

Chief appears on the stage. His head is rolling about.

I hold my breath; everyone’s eyes are gathered upon a spot.

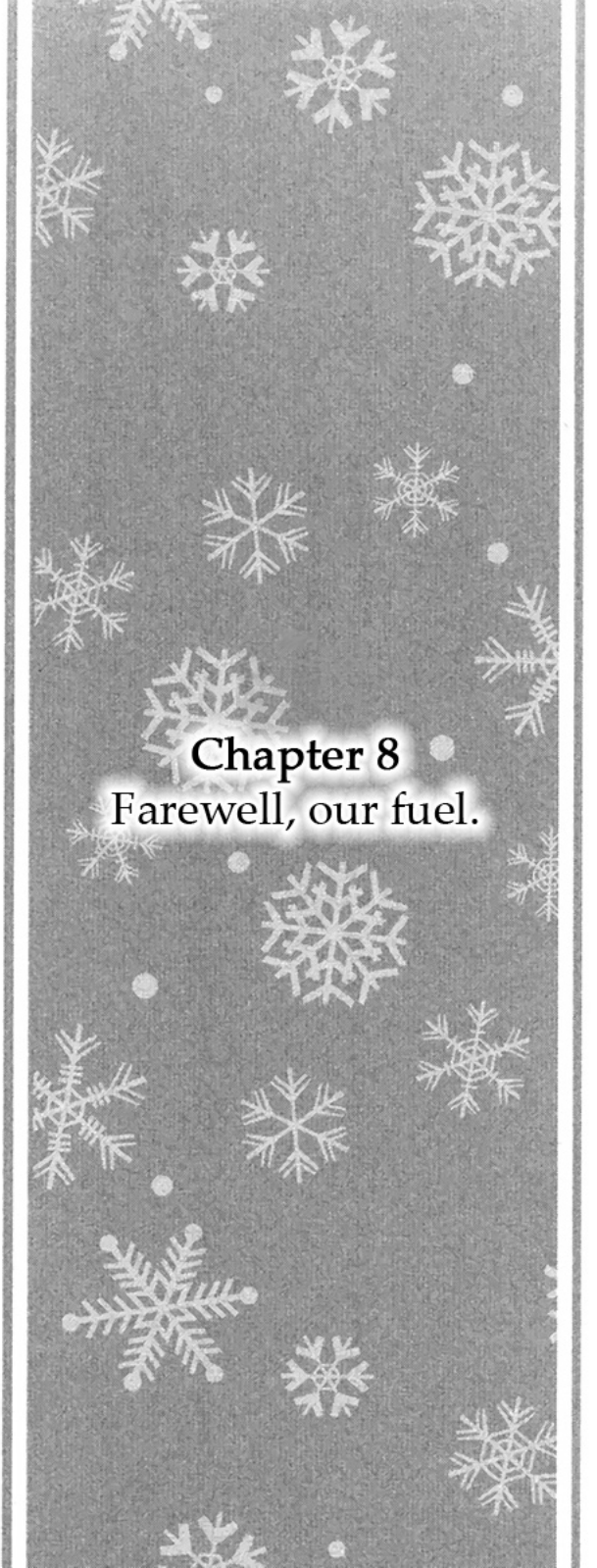
—What will he say?

I feel uneasy. I have nothing else that can convince them. If I get routed by Chief here, there’s no way back.

Chief sits on the podium.

And all he says is,

“Time for voting.”



Chapter 8
Farewell, our fuel.

Chapter 8 – Farewell, our fuel.

And so, the final voting is as such.

'Preposition to have humans continue to live' – thirty votes.

'Preposition to wipe out humanity' – nine votes.

'Preposition for humans and robots to coexist' – two hundred and sixty three votes.

-Total number with voting rights: three hundred and seven (100% voted) -Void/invalid votes: Five.

An overwhelming majority voted for humans and robots to coexist.

After the results are out, Chief bows silently, and returns to the Village Hall. He look really forlon, and I don't know what to say to him.

And so, we choose to head down the path of coexisting with humans, carving a new path out for ourselves.

However, the real troubles are just beginning.

"Not enough...?"

I ask Viscaria in the Senate Hall of the Village Council.

"Yes...overwhelmingly lacking."

Viscaria explains to me slowly.

"Three days after the meeting is over, and the total number of batteries we found is almost about five hundred or so, regardless of size. And also, less than half are rechargeable and can be used directly."

“Then, can’t we use some of the recharging cables from the Snow White?”

I ask as a matter of fact. “No can do.” Viscaria shakes her head.

“The displacement to the surface is only about five hundred meters, but the actual distance might be tens of kilometres. We’re really lacking in cables.”

“Hmmm, so we can only use the batteries we have…?”

“Yes.”

Viscaria grabs the beret, and seem to be at a loss of ideas as she places it on the table.

The only generator of the village is the ‘Snow White’. The ‘crystal furnace’ inside the Spindle can generate a lot of electricity, and the villages maintain the daily operations through this electricity. The cables to recharge are located all over the village, and anyone can recharge as long as they remain in the village.

But this operation is different. All electrical facilities can’t be used from the moment we leave till we reach the surface. We need to rely on the electricity we have at hand, three hundred people’s worth.

“Based on the headcount, we need to maintain at least twenty hours of battery power. Our current stock can’t hold ten hours’ worth. It’s not enough.”

“Got it. Anyway, I’ll try getting a census of the village again.”

“No other way here.”

Viscaria adjusts her cap, “I’ll go to the clinic.” And stands up, saying this, “I’d check on the heavy facilities.”

“I’ll go check on the icemobile, even though it’s probably not going to be of much use.”

And so we head to our separate ways, looking for clues.

There's no progress in the preparation work.

We gather all the batteries we can find, from the icemobile and the heavy machinery, to the remotes and the torchlights. However, all the batteries we can gather are either rusted or burned, probably because we have been 'collecting' them again, and it's far less than what the plan requires. I thought of a plan to use the spare lighting of the ceiling when there's a power outage, but even so, that only makes up a little bit.

But time waits for no one.

s—What can I do with the batteries…?

I roll about on my bed at home, thinking hard, trying to come up with something. But no matter how much I think, it's all barren, and I can't think of any ideas.

"This is troubling…haaa."

I sigh hard. And then, at this moment,

"Yo, you dropped your skirt here."

"Wah!"

I leap up in shock. I narrow my eyes, and see a familiar blond in the room. My skirt is twirling around on his fingertip.

"Wait! What are you doing!?'

I snatch my skirt back from this shameless guy.

"Don't just barge in here."

"I tried knocking. There was no response."

"Why are you here?"

“I’m just here to cheer up Amaryllis with the conflicted look on her face while humming away.”

“I never asked you for help.”

“Don’t be shy now…oh, one bra here.”

“Return it to me, you pervert.”

I snatch my underwear from the guy. Looking closely, I find my underwear and clothes scattered all over the room, and I remember that I have yet to clean up my room in a while. The music box with the battery removed is lying there, giving a lonely feeling.

—Ahh, what do I do with the battery?

I pick up the music box that has lost power, and start to be frustrated again. If this keeps up, I will have to notify everyone on delaying the operation again. I don’t want everyone else to feel dejected after being fired up, but delaying it with no end date in mind will prove fatal.

“Just take a break for now. It’s important to change your mood.”

Eisbahn gives a rare proper suggestion.

—Well, I can’t think of anything good if I keep being stubborn about this, huh…?

I sigh, and decide to take a little rest. I lean my back on the wall, and let my body sink into the chair. My joints give off a ‘creak’, and I just feel heavy all over.

—Ahh, I’ve been really tired recently.

I relax my body, and close my eyes. “You alright?” “Yep, I’m fine.” “Good then.” I carelessly converse with Eisbahn, and it it ends.

After some time passes.

"...Hey, Eisbahn."

I slowly speak up. Eisbahn's already lying on the bed, "Hm?" and he asks back carelessly.

"Can I ask you something?"

"What?"

"Why did you say me back then?"

I know my voice's really soft here. Back then—I collapsed when I short-circuited, and it was Eisbahn who came to save me.

He gives me a smile, and says,

"It's a man's duty to save his lover, right?'

"Be serious here."

"Ehh, but I'm really serious here."

Eisbahn's tone is as mischievous as ever.

"I never mentioned anything about going to the surface to anyone else."

"I saw you head towards the 'REM forest'."

"I see...then, how did you figure out where I was? That place was so far even the communicator can't work."

"You entered the work tunnels, didn't you? I followed the footprints."

"H-hmm...you're pretty smart there."

"Thanks for the compliments."

—Ahh, This is hopeless.

I shake my head slightly. I really want to thank him formally, but I just can't bring myself to do it.

—Right.

I clench my fist hard, and say,

"…E-erm."

"Huh?"

"Well…th-thank, you…for saving, me."

"Heh?"

Eisbahn sits up from the bed, and turns towards me,

"You're actually thanking me for real here. The heavens are going to shoot spears down on us."

"It's fine. You are my savior…once in a while."

"Savior…nice way of calling it. Just feels like I'll be forgiven for whatever I do."

"Wait, what are you going to do?"

I cover my body with both hands. This guy is able to casually say something like 'the reward is your body'.

But it's different this time.

"Can I ask you something?'

"What?'

"Tell me. How did the 'humans-robots coexisting plan' come about?"

"…? What do you mean?"

“Basically. You thought of a third plan other than to wipe them out or let them live. What gave you the inspiration?”

“Ahh, you mean that.”

I rub my cheek with my index finger, and get down to the point.

“Well, how do I put it…’halving’.”

“Halving?”

“Hm, you know I was a nanny robot, right? Back then, ‘halving’s the mantra from the Principal.”

Whenever the children have an argument, Principal will always teach them ‘let’s do halving’. Even if they’re sweets, or toys, he will recommend that we halve them.

“…Back then, Yuu and Fuu—ahh, they’re the children at the kindergarten. Both of the argued.”

With nostalgic feelings, I narrate. Thinking back about it now, what happened back then feels like yesterday.

“They were fighting over a ball. I was troubled as I was unable to get them to play nice. Principal came by, and suggested ‘halving’.”

—Now then, I shall halve this ball.

At this moment, Eisbahn interrupts,

“You can’t half a ball, right? It’s not a biscuit.”

“You think so too? I used to think the same thing as you. Guess what the principal did?”

I roll the handkerchief in my hands into a ball, and toss it at Eisbahn.

“We end up playing catch. “Here, how about it? Throw the ball

back.” Principal throws the ball at Yuu, and so Yuu and Fuu end up playing catch, becoming happier. Before I knew it, I too was playing along.”

“Hmm…this Principal sure can mix things up.”

Plop, he tosses the ball of handkerchief back at me.

“Hmm, it sure sounds like pulling at fast one, but I really respect him back then. Ahh, there’s such a way to do this, I thought. Even he manages to ‘halve’ a ball successfully when there’s no way to do that.

Principal loves to halve everything. If children are fighting over toys, he’ll get them to play together; if children are fighting over a picture book, he’ll get them to read together.

“So, I was wondering if I can do halving about this. The future doesn’t just belong to humans or robots, but rather, it’s to be opened by both sides.”

“So, a future of ‘halving’…”

Eisbahn suddenly picks up the handkerchief ball in my hand, and twirls it around on his fingertips. His actions resemble the Principal so much, and it leaves a slightly surprised.

“Then—”

He asks,

“If there’s a situation where you can’t ‘halve’ it, what will you do?”

This really is an unexpected question.

“Eh? A situation where I’m unable to halve?”

“For example.”

He unravels the ball, having it take the shape of the handkerchief again.

“Assume that you are in a river, nobody will save us in a while, and we’re running out of battery. If we just leave this be, both of us will die of frostbite. There’s only one battery left. What will you do?”

“Can’t one person just share half the battery?”

“What if you can’t? If we share half, both will die. If that happens, what will you do? Are you still going to halve it?”

“Well…”

I tell him the answer I have in my heart.

“I’ll give it all to you.”

“…Huh?”

Eisbahn widens hi eyes in shock. “Well, that’s because.” I then continue, “You saved my life before, so this time, it’s my turn to save you. There’s only one battery, so I’ll give it all to you. Then we’ll have saved each other’s life once—and that’s halving.”

“Wha—”

At this moment, he’s looking at me in utter shock.

“What is it?’

“…Goodness.” What he says next leaves me perplexed. **“You’re always like this. Treasure yourself more.”**

—Eh?

I stare right at him.

“What, did you just…?”

I give Eisbahn a suspicious look as he suddenly changes his tone. He then seem to realize something’s amiss in his tone, “Ahh…” and he stammers.

“Hey, did you just say something weird?”

“No, nothing at all…”

He shows a rare falter in his eyes, and then, he seems intent on trying to cover something as he averts his eyes.

“Just a little slip up.”

“Really? Sounds disgusting to hear you talk with a serious tone.”

“As I said, it’s a slip up.”

“Your tone sure sounded serious there.”

“Anyway!” He probably didn’t want to get involved in this topic again as he raises his voice, saying, “Isn’t this because you said something strange? Anyway, your answer just now isn’t even ‘halving’.”

“Well, that’s not true. Since you say so, the basic premise itself is that your question is too weird. ‘two people, just one battery’. There’s no way such an extreme situation can happen—”

—Huh…?

Suddenly, a flash fizzles through my Mind Circuit.

—Two people, one battery.

Two people, one.

“I got it! There’s this method too!”

I grab Eisbahn on the shoulders and shake him hard. “He-hey, what’s with this out of a sudden?” He exclaims.

“I think there’s a way to solve this battery issue!”

Thirty minutes after the emergency meeting was called, all the

Senators are gathered in the Village Council Hall.

“I see.”

Viscaria widens her eyes in shock.

“How is it? Not a bad idea here, right?”

“Not bad, great idea, actually. No doubt that this is worthy of the ‘Grand Prix’.”

This is my idea.

—Have two people share one.

Humans and robots, share the same battery through ‘halving’—this is the idea I came up with.

Every Cradle contains a large battery to maintain a person’s life. My idea is to connect the robots to these batteries.

We’ll pull the cables from the batteries of the Cradle, and connect to the circuits of the villages. The villagers can move freely without any electricity. Also, the batteries gathered that aren’t used can be used to replenish the units for this operation. Now we have three hundred people’s worth of battery power ‘appearing’.

“In that case, will the lifespan of the batteries in the Cradle not run out?’

“No problems.” Viscaria answers Götz’s question.

“The batteries of the Cradles are massive, and us robots won’t cause much burden if it’s one to a unit. Only about ten percent will be used up if we spend about twenty two hours over a period of twenty four hours recharging.”

“Then, we need to do something about the battery, right?”

“We’ll need to do simple connections by ourselves. Leave this to

me."

"We'll leave it to you."

If there's insufficient battery power, we'll just borrow from humans —looking back, it's not hard to think about it. Why nobody has ever thought of it is largely related to the mental characteristics of a robot. We robots will offer our parts for humans, yet we never thought about using this logic the other way around. This causes a psychological blind spot, a blind angle of an idea.

And so, we slowly progress forth on the issue of the battery because of my suggestion. I'm really grateful to 'Principal' for giving me the 'halving' inspiration, and also to Eisbahn, to whom I'll give a-thousandth of that thanks.

Of course, there is still a whole load of issues, like a possibility like the generator on the surface being unable to work, or countermeasures in case the villagers or the Cradles malfunction. However, the issue of the batteries remains the biggest challenge, so solving it is a huge boost to our operation.

Going at this pace, if we solve all the issues one by one, we'll definitely be able to return to the surface—so I have such a hope in my heart.

However, a bigger crisis looms upon me, as though my thoughts are read.

A day after the battery problem's solved.

The Snow White malfunctioned.

The first report comes from the emergency wireless channel.

"Snow White's output is dropping! Hurry!"

Viscaria's anxious voice can be heard through the wireless, and I immediately get off my bed and dash towards the REM forest.

“What’s wrong…!?”

I arrive at the REM forest, and see Viscaria completely focused on working the control panel. Her actions seem to reflect the seriousness of the situation.

“The output of the crystal furnace is weird!! Ahh, it’s dropping by half!”

I see the panel show ‘49%’, and the numbers behind the decimal point continues to drop, like a slot.

“What’s the reason?”

“I don’t know! The extraction purity of the crystal furnace is dropping massively….! Anyway, if we’re lacking in fuel—ahh, damn it, it’s 40% now!”

“What about the emergency fuel…!?”

“There’s some out there!”

“I’ll go get it!”

I carry the bag of fuel—crystals of extremely high purity, put it on my shoulder, and ladder up the ladder used for inspecting the Snow White, hurrying to the top of the spindle. The spinning speed of the spindle is slower than anyone else, and the light is clearly a lot darker than usual.

I spend about thirty seconds to arrive at the top of spindle.

“Viscaria, I’m here! Open the furnace!”

“Be careful!”

A strong blue light gushes into a corner of the spindle. The refilling hatch leading to the crystal furnace is opened, and I remove the safety installation holding the fuel in, pouring it all in.

“How is it…?”

I release all the fuel I have in hand, and ask Viscaria who’s below me.

But reality is cruel.

“It’s useless! Twenty, nineteen, eighteen…ah, ahh!”

Viscaria’s voice becomes increasingly softer.

Finally, the spindle grinds to a halt, and the spindle output stops at ‘0.00%’. Red warning lights can be seen all over the control panel, and Viscaria lowers her head weakly.

“…Well, that’s enough already, Amaryllis.”

Her calm voice echoes throughout the room.

“W-what’s the matter?”

I ask worriedly. The spindle slows down gradually before me, and finally stops.

Viscaria shakes her head, and mutters,

“It’s completely stopped.”

All the senators receive the message, and gather at the Snow White again in an hour.

“I see.”

Upon hearing the report, Chief quietly closes his eyes.

“I’m really sorry.”

“No, this isn’t your fault.”

Chief says slowly. This is the first time we’ve officially talked to

Chief ever since that Meeting.

"Then, what is the reason?"

Chief closes his eyes, and asks,

"The crystal furnace itself isn't really damaged at all." Viscaria flatly answers, "But the extraction rate of the energy."

The reason why the Snow White stopped was basically due to depreciation. Having worked for years, the crystal furnace is increasingly filled with impurities, and the extraction rate is thus lowered. At this point, it's at its limit.

"I thought it could last for another hundred years. Didn't think it'll wear out so soon."

"Can we not insert all the emergency fuel, and have it start working again?"

Götz asks, "No." and Viscaria denies him immediately.

"A massive amount of energy is required to get a non-functional furnace working again. That type of fixed volume is like eroding rocks with water."

Viscaria lowers her beret further, and grits her teeth. It's not hard to imagine that for her, the technician-in-charge, this is the outcome most regretful to her.

"Then, what do we do?" Eisbahn leans on the wall, "Tomorrow's the deadline."

He looks up at the Snow White, and frowns. Even he, usually so cheeky, gives such a grim look, and this clearly shows how dire the situation is.

"Ugh."

I too can't answer.

The Cradles have spare batteries, but they can only last for twenty four hours as they are for emergency use. Also, the crystal furnace is the only generator in the village, and it stopped working. Thus, recharging the Cradles' batteries from the outside won't work. Even if we do continue to search for the portable batteries we gather, it'll only last half a day. If that happens— Our masters will die.

—Why, did it end up this way.

The sudden reality is so cruel, as though we're informed of a terminal illness. The Snow White loses its usual luster, and my feelings become increasingly dejected as the room is only lit by luminous lights.

The room is filled with a short silence.

Everyone is unable to say anything, cornered by the despair. Nobody can answer the question, the question of how to restart the heart of a patient that has stopped. Unlike a human, the Snow White can't be revived with electric shocks.

Breaking the silence here is the oldest person in the village.

"The most important thing here is the 'purity', isn't it?"

"Eh?"

I lift my head. Chief merely has an eye opened, glancing aside at me.

"Chief, what did you just say?"

"As I have said." Chief calmly states, "Due to many years of operating, the crystal furnace has lots of residue and impurities mixed in the lowers the purity of the fuel to the minimum. This is the same rationale as a rechargeable battery being unable to do so after a certain number of times...so, if a fuel of extremely high purity is to be added, the extraction rate will increase, and the Snow White will be able to restart. Is that right, Viscaria?"

“Eh, ah, yes.” Viscaria blinks once she’s suddenly mentioned. “That is true. But, there’s a need for crystal plants of extremely high purity, a type that can get a major generator working at once. Where do we find such a thing in the village though—”

“There is.”

“Eh?”

“There is fuel. Of that level of purity at that.”

And then, what Chief says next leaves everyone stunned.

“That will be me.”

“...Huh?”

Viscaria and I question in unison.

“My body is made of a highly pure fuel called ‘Crystal Lead’. The purity of the fuel will improve if you throw me into the furnace and burning me, and the extraction rate will increase noticeably—the Snow White shall be revived.”

“Wh-what are you saying here? Burn you, Chief? You got to be joking.”

“I was originally created for this purpose. From head to toe, my entire body was created to be a robot containing the most important fuel, simply living for this purpose. The reason why I was assigned the purpose of Chief is all for the purpose of fuel preservation. I do call it ‘saving energy’, but I have been offering my body to the Snow White as fuel.”

“Wa-wait, Chief!?”

Faced with the sudden words from Chief, I’m momentarily left unable to comprehend.

—Chief is fuel? Crystal Lead?

“I shall repeat this again. If I am thrown into the furnace, the purity of the fuel will increase, and the Snow White will be operational again. When this happens, all the conditions for the operation will be at hand. Today, I shall bid farewell to everyone.”

“Chief, you’re kidding here, right? It’s just the usual lame joke, right…?’

I anxiously ask, and Chief shakes his head,

“I really am sorry.”

There’s no smile in his eyes; he’s as serious as ever.

—Chief’s being serious here…!

Once I realize this, my body immediately heats up.

“Cheat…!”

I lean over, and raise his head.

“Please, enough with the foolish words! Everyone’s finally going to the surface! A new life is about to begin! What are we going to do without you around, Chief!?”

“It’s fine. There’s still you here. And also Viscaria. Götz too. And Eisbahn. And everyone else…my mission comes to an end.

“No!”

I bring Chief to my chest, embracing him.

“Didn’t we work hard over the past hundred years!? I don’t want to bid farewell here!”

“But if you don’t burn me, the Cradles will die.”

“E-erm, right! Ev-everyone, let’s think of something together to get the Snow White working agagin. If we gather our thoughts, we’ll

come up with something good! Hey, let's do this, okay, Chief!?"

"Unfortunately. There is no time left. Everyone in the Cradle will die tomorrow…there's no time to hesitate."

"B-but!"

"I suppose I shall be fuel here. This is a fiery man at work. Gahahaha!!"

"Chief…!"

Unwilling to give up, I embrace Chief with more strength.

"I-I'm not letting go! I'm not letting go until you give up on that idea, Chief!"

"Amaryllis…"

"Yes, Chief." Viscaria too extends her feelers, as though trying to hold Chief down, "It's terrible to say goodbye here. It's fine. There's definitely an idea. Let's all go to the surface together."

"True is that! This village needs you, Chief!"

"Yeah old man. What's with you acting cool at your old age?"

Everyone surround Chief.

"Seriously, you people are too kind…"

Chief laments,

"But I too have my responsibility as Chief…and it is time to go our separate ways."

"Chief!"

"Let go of me now, Amaryllis."

"No!"

I exert more strength.

And so, Chief lets out a little sigh, "I don't want to do this…" he mutters, and shouts, **"Let go! This is an order!"**

Before the voice trails off, my body shivers, and my hands cupping the Chief loosen.

—Eh, eh!?

"Stay still. This is an order."

Immediately, my body's frozen in place.

I can't move my body, I can't move my fingers, I can't blink.

—You're kidding…an override code!?

Everyone else is the same. Time seem to have stopped as everyone remains rooted.

"I shall be honest."

Thuck thuck, Chief's head hops onto the Core of the Snow White, the top of the 'spindle'. The 'Crystal Furnace' is over there.

"I am a 'supervisor'. I am tasked by humanity to observe if the Snow White is operating as normal—in other words, I am sent here as a 'spy'."

—Wha…

The sudden confession leaves me stunned.

"That 'secret room' was a guard room meant to watch over the village, and through the are numerous displays installed there, I watched over every single action in the village. The robot lying in the room was my 'colleague', who malfunctioned in the process."

We're all left dumbfounded as Chief continues to talk about the truth. That 'secret room' was a space suitable for humans to live in, that once the Ice Age ends, the humans waking up intend to live there, and observe all the actions of the villagers.

At this moment, Chief closes his eyes. His face is filled with deep wrinkles, like the ripples rising from the bottom of his heart.

"You all do want to know why I became the Chief, right? Remember that there was no election, and I was elected as Chief, right? That's because the humans have programmed it in your Mind Circuit. This 'override' too is the same. In cases of emergency—like for example, you have some intentions to damage the Snow White, I will have the privilege to 'purge' you all."

Chief opens his eyes again, and looks around. He looks at each of us in the eyes, affirming something.

"But I never made such an order, and I can't. You're too serious, too hardworking, too devoted…there was no such need."

With the white mist engulfing the 'REM forest', a robot head continues to narrate, with four wax sculpture-like robots remaining still around him.

"Ever since we came to this village, I've changed. I'm supposed to invigilate over you, but before I knew it, I enjoyed living with you. Working with you, laughing, crying, singing, dancing with all of you —I enjoyed every single day. Before I knew it, I forgot my mission. It will be great if such peaceful, normal, ordinary daily village life could have continued.

With nostalgic feelings, Chief continues on. The spindle gives off a deep brown glow behind him, like a faded photograph.

"But seventy years later, the Snow White's reserve parts have finally depleted, and the villagers started extraction. The villagers have all become worn down to keep the Snow White running. There were even deaths…so I started to think, the humans just sleep there

without doing anything, and you work so hard to offer your bodies, wearing out, dying. What's the point of this? What's with the discrimination and difference? Is this really fine? Is it really fine to die protecting humans? In any case, is there any worth in protecting humanity? Are those culprits who left humanity unable to live on the surface going to live on by sacrificing robots? What kind of future awaits us? I was frustrated, and the conclusion I had was—"

Chief then raises his voice

"The preposition to wipe out humanity."

—So that's how it came about...

I finally understand; I finally understand the reason why Chief suddenly said to 'wipe out humanity'. It sounded sudden, but it was a conclusion Chief came to after much thought.

"I called for a village meeting. I find it most appropriate to have the villagers decide the future of the village. No matter the outside, I shall abide. But you lot exceeded my expectations, discovered a third option, and found a way to coexist with humans. Once I personally witnessed these, my mission's done."

"...Open." Chief then mutters, and with a rumble, the spindle trembles. The outer wall slides aside, and a blue light emits from the furnace.

Chief hops up, and moves to the opening of the furnace. My body shivers, but I can't do anything due to the override. Stop, don't go. I keep looking at the Chief, but Chief replies with a kind smile.

"I love you lot, everyone in the village. You're all so serious, kind, honest, brave, purpose-driven, treasure your comrades, and never do anything to hurt others. I love you for these reasons, and thus, I want to protect. You lot are worthy of a bright future rather than the selfish humans. Hmm...even at this point, I am still trying to defend myself. A foolish Chief I am."

Chief then states his ‘will’.

“…Amaryllis, you are the one with the highest standing in the village, and thus forth, you shall inherit my title as Chief. I shall leave the village to you… Götz, you will be the vice Chief. Continue protecting everyone with those sturdy arms of yours and your loyal heart…Viscaria, your skills are the lifeline of the village. As Amaryllis’ advisor, please provide the steady backbone to the entire village… Eisbahn. You are so unlike these stubborn, serious selves, but do offer your assistance when they are in trouble.”

The opening of the crystal furnace slides down. The fuel…Chief rides on it, and sinks into the light.

“This shall be goodbye…remove order.”

“Chief!”

The moment the order is removed, I get my body moving, leaping over as I try to catch up to Chief.

“Chief, wait! Don’t go!”

“What…?”

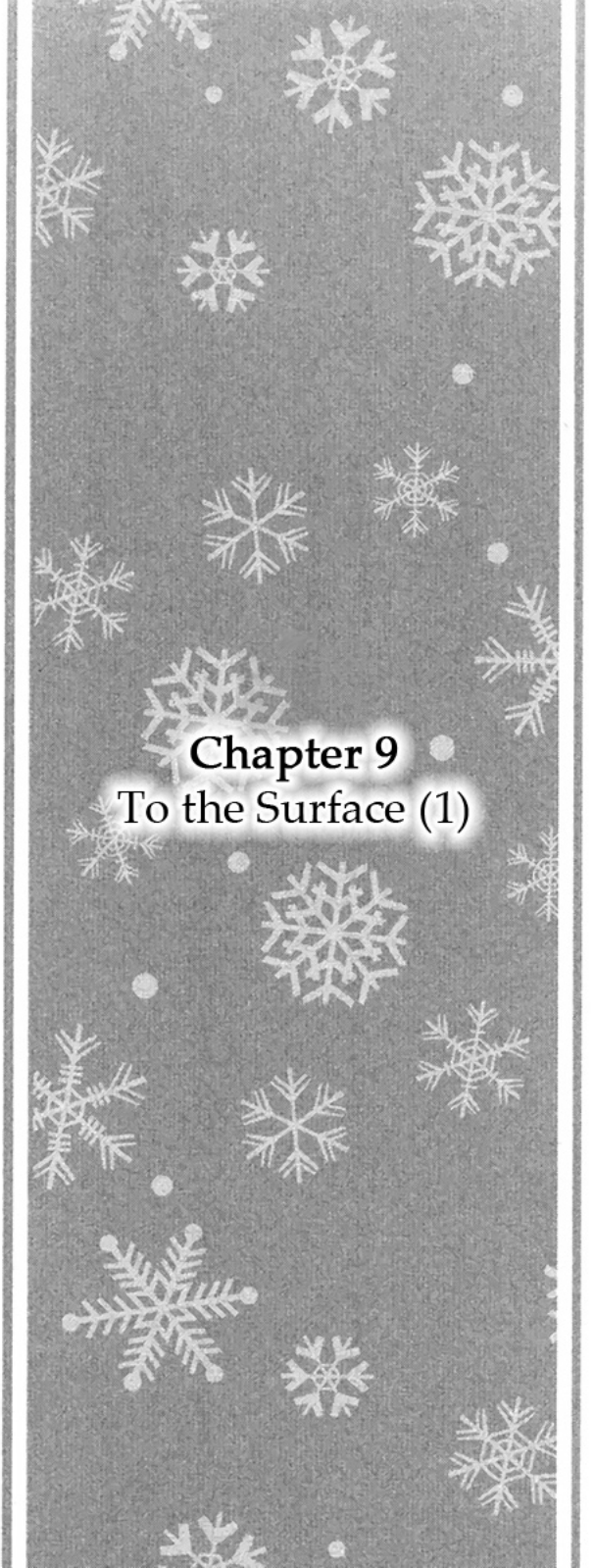
The moment Chief vanishes into the furnace, he smiles,

“This is a form of saving electricity…”

And so, Chief vanishes into the blue light. The opening is completely sealed, and the spindle glows. The light races through the surface of the Snow White like a web, dazzling like the sun. The efficiency is restored to almost 100%. The Snow White awakens, like the icy face of a girl becoming red with life.



Those were Chief's final moments.



Chapter 9
To the Surface (1)

Chapter 9 – To the Surface (1)

A night passes, and it's the day of the operation.

"Everyone, line up in single files. Face forward."

All three hundred villagers are gathered inside the REM forest. Twenty a row, fifteen rows altogether. Every one of them comprise of male and female, young and old. The children today are exceptionally obedient for once.

"Row A, report in!"

Götz orders, and the villagers call out in order "One!" "Two!" Three!". It's a military-like check, but the voices of the children gives it the vibe of an elementary school sports meet, and gives a few chuckles.

Starting from row A to row O, the attendance taking continues. There are three hundred people lined up and six who aren't, a total of three hundred and six villagers. Everyone, except for the Chief, is present.

At this point, Chief's death has yet to be revealed. The Senate decided to wait till everyone arrived at the surface and calm down to avoid agitating the villagers, before announcing the death and the funeral.

"Lady Amaryllis, thus ends the attendance."

"Good work."

I thank Götz, and turn to his side.

"How's things on your end, Viscaria?"

"Hold on."

Viscaria leans out from the chair, and is checking all the parameters on the control panel of the Snow White. The screens show all angles of the Snow White, and the spindle continues to spin at its original pace.

“Cradle values normal. All vital values as normal. Eh, and…yes, yes, got it.”

Viscaira mutters to herself as she proceeds with the final checks. “Okay!” She rolls her sleeves,

“Amaryllis, I’m done here!”

“Understood!”

—Everything’s going well.

I nudge my chest with my hands, affirming my determination. This operation affects the future of humanity and robots. We’re transporting more than three hundred masters to the surface. I can’t let my guard down until they wake up peacefully.

—Rest well, Chief. We’ll definitely finish this.

I recall the face of the deceased Chief, and bit my lips lightly.

—Rest well too, Gappy. I’ll definitely bring the Cradle you protected to the surface.

Ga, ppy, the nostalgic volce echoes in my mind again.

“Now then, everyone!”

I shout at the villagers who are all lined up.

“Starting from now, we’re beginning the operation to move the Cradles out!”

In the meantime, the atmosphere seems tense.

“The operation will occur like before. Each team as a unit is to move the Cradles to the surface based on the designated routes. Follow the instructions of your leaders, and move extra cautiously—now then.”

I loudly declare,

“Begin the operation!”

The outer walls of the Snow White slides open, resembling a massive, blooming flower, pretty and regal.

Cradles are being escorted out like newly hatched eggs inside the white storage units of the flower. The eggs are being transported out for about ten meters, and arrive at the other end—Götz’s back. There is a latch installed on his back to move the Cradles that synchronizes perfectly with the magnets of the Cradle. The cables extending from the Cradle are attached to Götz’s chest. Thus, the preparation work is complete.

“First array, launching!”

Götz carries the Cradle easily as he climbs up the ladder of the wall. Looking down from the top, it appears that long and narrow eggs are climbing up the wall.

With Götz leading, the second villager follows suit. Thus, the villagers carrying the Cradles climb up one after another. About two hundred meters or so up the ‘path canal’, the ladder is directed sideways towards the ‘work tunnel’.

—No problems.

I watch the villagers advance as I gently put my hand before my chest.

—It’ll succeed.

There’s another twenty hours. Anything beyond that, and both us

and the Cradles will die.

The thing most worrying here will be an earthquake. Of course, once a tremor is detected, everyone will receive an emergency notification. Each team has a spare battery, but even so, due to the uncertainty of the earthquake scale, nobody knows what will happen. We're completely lost if there are massive earthquakes that cause the work tunnels to collapse completely.

—Oh Earth, please. Just remain peaceful for now.

I pray to the earth god as I wait for time to subside. There's nothing we can do, and I can't help but feel uneasy.

"This is Götz. Arrived at the first checkpoint have I!"

The first checkpoint is the entrance into the work tunnel.

"Right, going well! Listen, there's still lots of time, so please be careful!"

"Understood!"

It has been fifteen minutes since the operation started, and more than thirty villagers have departed. Götz will take the lead, and Eisbahn follows at the end. Viscaria and I will not be participating, and will be giving instructions in the Snow White until the operation is over.

"How's it going?"

I watch the screen next to Viscaria. There's the underground world map with numerous lights moving up in a single line.

"Energy reactions are all normal. Going very well."

"I see...thank goodness."

The red lights continue to move forward in the underground well. The planned path has been imprinted into the Mind Circuits of the

villagers, but there may be changes in cases of obstacles.

“Cradle A block, transport complete! Opening B block!”

“Understood! Keep going like this!”

I give the instruction, and with a rumbling sound, the second petal of the Snow White—the B block is exposed. The Cradles leaving the units are transported out, carried on the back of the villagers.

—Right, things are going well.

The Cradles are moved out in an orderly manner, and once we reach the surface, it will be a succeed—I can’t help but make an optimistic guess.

But,

Right when the seventy-third Cradle is being carried.

A siren rings.

“Pulse detected!”

Viscaria yells.

“High energy hitting us!”

The hopeless of her voice strikes me along with an electric pulse running through me.

—An earthquake at such a moment!

“Everyone, stop!” I contact everyone through the wireless. “Initiate Manual C-1! Lie prone on the ground and stay defensive—”

Before I can finish, the siren becomes reality.

—!!!

A massive tremor strikes us.

—Woah!!?

I lose control of my body, my knees land on the ground before I lose balance, and I fall forward.

“Ev……every…one!”

I want to give evacuation instructions to everyone, but the strong quake wouldn’t allow me to. Like a massive wave rocking a boat, I tumble all around, and the ceiling collapses upon me like rain.

—Ah-ahh!

And then, I see this. In a corner of my shaking vision, I see Viscaria and the technicians facing her. Beyond that, the massive white building, the Snow White tilts greatly, the landscape of the RM forest cracks open, and forms a massive black mouth—

—Ah, ahh, you got to be kidding. Ahh, ah, ahhhhhh…!

A rumble.

With a ripping sound, the ground cracks up like heinous fangs. The Snow White loses its balance and begins to topple over, and the cracks continue to spread as quickly. The massive Snow White trembles along with a few villagers, and topples over abruptly with a deafening metallic sound.

Even so, the earthquake shows no signs of abating. The earth is roaring, the air quivering, and the world sways with malice. I grab the ground that has collapsed, trying to remain where I am as I sway like a clock bell. The Cradles being moved out pinball each other, rolling into the crack, and buried by the collapsing rubble. Everyone’s tumbled over by the immense quakes, unable to reach out to the Cradles fallen by their sides.

The earthquake is quelled after a few minutes, and once it does,

blue light gushes out from the cracks like a waterfall, followed by massive explosions booming in the underground world. The pillars of flames rise up the path canal, and the swirling crimson flames filled the entire room with black smoke like the devil.

Those were the final moments of the Snow White.

—Uu...

After three minutes of downtime, my Mind Circuit is rebooted.

—Uu...uuuu....

I exert strength into my fingers, trying my best to climb up. The REM forest remains filled with black smoke, but white steam spray upon it, apparently trying to flush it away. It appears the emergency fire system has been activated, and the extinguishers are sprayed.

"Uu."

I push aside the rubble pressing on me, and stand up. Due to the cracks on the floor, the ground is tilted greatly and the walls and roofs are twisted. The massive cracks that devoured the Snow bare their wounds before me, about to cleave the house in half.

—Ahh!

I realize something, get up on my knees, and shove the rubble aside. I can see the familiar 'feeler' there.

"Viscaria...!"

I shove aside a large metal slice, and shake my friend on the shoulder. "uuu..." she finally reacts.

"Viscaria, you alright...!?"

"...I'm fine, I guess..."

Her eyes are giving off light, and she weakly get up.

Once she regains her functions, Viscaria stands up by putting her feeler on my shoulder. Her white face has signs of scratches on her face. It seems that she only has some minor wounds.

“How’s the situation…?”

Viscaria presses her neck and turns her neck around as she asks calmly. Seeing how poised she remains even after all this, I too calm down a bit.
“The Snow White—”

I look back at the crack, and smoke continue to rise from this crevice-like hole, depicting the intensity of the fire beneath.

“…Wait.”

Viscaria’s eyes look exceptionally grim as she taps at the portable terminal at her waist. Numerous red lights are flickering on it like a starry sky.

“How…is it?”

I look over at the screen with apprehension.

“It’s useless.” Viscaria stats bluntly, “There’s no energy reaction from the Snow White.”

“That’s…a complete wipeout?”

I ask, and Viscaria nods without a word.

—The Snow White, got wiped out…

There’s less than a hundred Cradles that were moved out. In other words, there are two hundred or so Cradles buried alive in the Snow White under the cracks.

“Ku…”

The shock and faltering pricks at my heart. A colossal damage

leaves me dejected.

At this moment, I recall Chief's words.

—Amaryllis, you are the one with the highest standing in the village, and thus forth, you shall inherit my title as Chief.

These words nudge me forth like an invisible hand.

—I shall leave the village to you

I take a deep breath, and switch on the wireless.

"Notifying all villagers!!" I cheer myself up, and yell, "Everyone, report your situations...! I repeat! Everyone, report your situations...!"

Midway through, I can hear anguished voices through the wireless.

"Za...this is...Ban. Can't move...at...all!"

"Massive damage...zazaa...we got wounded...!! Zaaa...need immediate...assistance...!!"

"Tunnel has collapsed...! Path is...obstructed...aahhh!!!"

There are collapses everywhere due to the earthquake, and many villagers are buried alive. I clench my fists, and instruct loud and clear.

"This is Amaryllis! Initiating Emergency Manual D-3! Anyone able to move is to assist the wounded! Everyone else is to secure the Cradles!"

"Tunnel is obstructed! What do we do...!"

"Prioritize rendezvous with our friends immediately! There's a shortcut at the cutback there!"

"C-Cradle is damaged! I-I don't have a battery!!"

“Don’t panic! Contact with the other Cradles, share batteries…! Follow Viscaria’s instructions after that!”

“I’m stuck in the ridge! Can’t move…!”

“Stay where you are! Wait for help right now!”

The signals pleading for help swarm the wireless like a burst dam, and I instruct them one after another. The priority mission at this point is to regroup.

Gather intel, affirm the situation, give immediate commands. Through the intel reflected by the villagers and the energy responses I got from Viscaria, I have a rough understanding of the situation. Given some estimates, there are more than a hundred and fifty dead or missing, and at least two hundred Cradles are destroyed. The scale of damage is mind-numbing, but this isn’t the time to be sighing.

“Remember to conserve battery power! Switch to power saving mode and cut off all functions that has nothing to do with maintaining the vitals! Nothing too complicated, just recall the contents of the manual!”

I continue to give instructions one after another, trying my best to avoid causing panic. Soon, the survivors gather by my side in trios, fives.

I try my best to sound as optimistic as possible so as to encourage those present.

“It’s fine! We still have lots of battery power. Everyone, let’s calm down before taking action!”

My heart was rattled moments ago, and now it’s starting to calm down as I keep giving instructions. In any case, I’ll do what I can do, and once we get to the surface, we’ll sort everything out.

“I’m reassigning work to everyone! All survivors of the technical team are to go over to Viscaria! Put down the Cradles for the time

being and begin emergency checks. At the same time, treat the injured! All the children are to come over too! Everyone else, go help our buried friends! Follow me!"

—That's right, Amaryllis. Do your duty as the new Chief. This is your mission.

Again, I make up my mind, and a few minutes after I call out, more than thirty villagers gather around me. These people become the paramedics, and head out to save the buried injured and Cradles nearby. Sounds of breaking walls can be heard as I look around, and I can see some limbs.

—Everyone, please stay safe…!

So I pray as I pull out the buried villagers from the rubble. The sturdy structure of the REM forest building fulfils its functions, as survivors are found one after another. Once they're dug up, spare batteries get attached to them. Once they are rebooted, they're dragged to the repair team led by VIscaria.

After twenty are saved,

"You hear me, Amaryllis…!?"

There's a signal from the wireless. No doubt that this voice is his.

"Eisbahn…!?"

"Yeah it's m…e!"

"Great, you're alright….! Are you hurt!"

"Enough with that and hurry to my side! Get everyone else here! Bring as many batteries as you can!"

"What's going on!?"

He sounds as serious as ever, and I start to feel increasingly tense.

I can only hear him shout,

“The Cradles are doomed…!! Lots of them!!”

I receive the report, and hurry to the scene,

“Amaryllis, over here!”

A tall blond is waving at me in a place my wireless can detect. His face is completely covered in soot, but there’s no visible wounds.

“Let’s go!”

“Ah, wait!”

I hurry after him as he sprint. Within the belly of the REM forest, the rubble piled on cause the ground to be heavily uneven and greatly tilted.

“This is…!” Once I arrive, I can’t help but open my eyes. “A Storage Unit…?”

The silver white object poking out like a large nail is the Storage Unit of the Snow White. At this point, it’s snapped in an L shape down the middle, akin to someone wincing in pain and cupping the belly.

“The contents…!?”

“It’s okay right now! But if don’t hurry up and save it, it’s gonna sink!”

“What the…!?”

I have a closer look, and see the Storage Unit is able to be swallowed by the crack, sinking down. The soft ground seem incapable of withstanding the massive weight.

“Emergency contat…!”

I immediately give an instruction.

“Storage Unit in C block is about to sink immediately! Anyone able to move, please gather immediately! Everyone, help ouit!”

The villagers frantically pull up the Storage Unit that’s sinking little by little. But even with the arm strength of the robots, it’s not easy to lift something with the weight of a hundred tonnes. The base is also collapsing, making it difficult to establish footing.

—Not good. We can’t pull it up!

I immediately make a decision.

“Stop pulling! There’s no way to avoid it sinking! Anyway, put out the Cradles inside! Recall Manual E-6, everyone! Steady!”

Righto! There’s this response, and the thirty people or so move towards their designated spots. Everyone gather in pairs, and spread out in equal distance between them.

“Eisbahn!”

“Right!”

Eisbahn and I stand at the front, and we start moving out the Cradles. I manually unlock the Unit, and two of us carry a single Cradle out, handing it off carefully to the duo behind us, who then hand off to the duo behind them. In other words, we’re following the concept of a bucket relay.

The silver lining here is that the Cradles in the storage unit isn’t really damage. However, the storage unit continues to sink, as though prompting us to hurry.

—Got to move faster!

I unlock them with brute force, and hastily drag out the Cradles from the unit. The number moved out increase to ten, twenty, but there’s no sign of it not sinking anymore. One-third of the Storage Unit is already buried into the crack, and it’s sinking faster than ever.

—If this keeps up, we won't make it!

After moving more than twenty five of them, we've reached our limit. The crack spreads like a wound, and the Storage Unit tilts greatly. Eisbahn and I hope off before it gets crushed underground.

"Ahhh...!"

The storage unit sinks in, seemingly devoured by the crack. This harkens memories of the last moments of the Snow White, and I can't help but hold my breath. The other villagers shriek in agony as the sounds echo in the room.

At that moment,

"Everyone get down!"

Suddenly, a blue light flashes from the side, and cleaves the sinking Storage Unit in two. The part above the bend pops out and gets stuck before us, while the remaining lower half sinks into the crack, vanishing completely.

Eisbahn sheathes his Phantom Blade, saying with a grim look.

"I'm not kind enough to let it take it all."

"C-36, C-39, C-41...C-49 is the last one."

Thirty eight Cradles have been salvaged from the Storage Unit. These Cradles are moved to the 'REM forest' and inspected. Even though they might seem okay on the outside, there are quite a few masters who died due to system malfunction on the inside.

As the Cradles are being checked, I'm reunited with the children led by Daisy. They all run towards me, sobbing, and I hug them tightly.

—What do we do now...?

We have a cave-in, and are stuck deep underground. Typically, this is a dire situation, but as robots, we can easily push aside the rocks

blocking us, and we can crush them. Götz and Eisbahn have much destructive power, and it's not difficult to eliminate all obstacles as we escape to the surface.

But this isn't the problem.

—The Cradles.

The Cradles require a lot of electricity to be maintained, and the internal batteries can only last for less than twenty hours. In other words, if we can't reach the surface within twenty hours, the Cradle will lose electric power, and the humans inside will freeze to death. Of course, the villagers sharing electricity with the Cradles will collapse.

Also, we can no longer return to the village. The cave-in caused by the earthquake blocks off the return path to the villager, and has it mostly buried. If we had voted the preposition to 'let humans live' or 'wipe out humanity' during that meeting, it would have undoubtedly resulted in a tragedy of a higher scale.

And the issue most tricky to deal with is the villagers who are buried alive. Given the remaining batteries, there's a high likelihood of us barely managing to return to the surface, or even running out of power. It's almost impossible to do this and save the villagers who have fallen to the bottom along with the Snow White. If we do, there's no doubt there'll be a second disaster—the rescuers will run out of batteries and lose mobility. When that happens, the villagers and Cradles will both be wiped out.

—Argh…

I'm forced to make a painful decision—truth be told, the worst decision. We'll have to abandon all our friends and most of the villagers who are buried alive, all for the sake of returning to the surface.

I lower my head bitterly. At this moment, a pair of hands land on my shoulders.

I look up, and see Eisbahn standing there.

"Chief.", he gives a signal that's not easily detected. ***"Please give the instructions."***

I reover.

—Right, I am.

The Chief.

Looking closely, the warning lights of the Cradles spread throughout the room like red fireflies. The time left is '21:47:56'.

There's still battery power. But we can't return to the village. We can't save those who are buried.

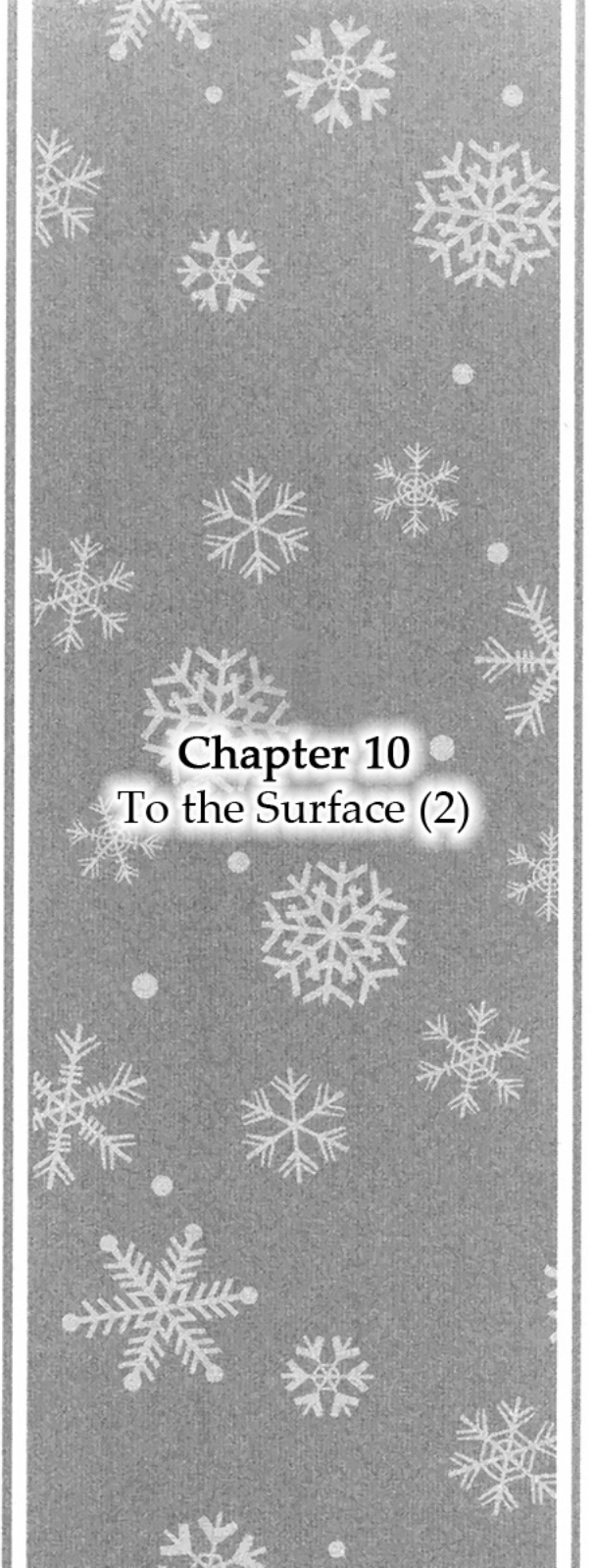
—Then there's only one way left.

"Everyone look here!"

I call out for attention. The villagers all look at me.

I exert strength into my words, as though trying to wipe away the anxiety.

"I'm giving the next instruction...!"



Chapter 10
To the Surface (2)

Chapter 10 – To the Surface (2)

Robot=105\Human=102

There's still one path.

The batteries of the Cradles can only last for another twenty two hours. We lost the Snow White, and have no extra electricity to spare. In this case, there should only be one single path left for us.

–To head straight to the surface.

The basic directive hasn't changed at all. The target is still the generator on the surface. We gather the scattered villagers in groups, assign leaders, and head forth again. If possible, we'll meet up again from time to time. We'll continue moving to the surface while being unable to contact each other—I give these instructions, and we hastily move forth.

The initial gateway is the 'Path Canal'.

—Carefully, carefully.

To avoid slipping, I watch the steps as I climb the ladder. Going first is Eisbahn, and then Viscaria, followed by a team of a hundred villagers. Adults, children, everyone is carrying a Cradle, wordlessly climbing up. This mass exodus of robots is reminiscent of refugees who lost their hometowns due, wounded, and slow-footed, but despite this, the only way to live is to move forward. There's no battery malfunction, no certainty that we can make it to the surface, and the aftershocks that strikes like pursuers. Whenever the aftershocks happen, we can only climb the ladder with all our might. A despair more gripping than anguish fills the atmosphere, and I can only give encouraging words through the wireless from time to time.

The path before us looks exceptionally perilous.

“Stop…!”

I grab the ladder and give the signale. The villagers behind me stop in unison.

I look up, and see a block of ice obstructing us. How many obstacles has it been over the fifty meters since we left the REM forest? I can’t be bothered to count.

“What’s the situation now?”

“By my estimate, about 1.4 tonnes. It’s hollow on the other side. We can take it out easily!”

Viscaria taps at the portable monitor at her hand, and it clearly depicts an upright visual.

—Right!

After the form analysis is done, I give a signal through the wireless.

“Prepare to shatter the ice! Everyone hang onto the wall inside of the ladder! Make sure the Cradles are close to the wall!”

After giving this warning that’s already a template by itself, I wait for the moment.

“All villagers in position!”

Viscaria checks the monitor, and notify me that all the villagers are in position to evade.

“Alright, Eisbahn!”

I give the call sign, “Leave it to me!” and Eisbahn extends his arm out to the ice block above us. A dazzling blue light extends from his fingertips, and the ‘Phantom Blade’ signature move is unleased. The dark tunnel is lit like day, and a fleeting blue space is unravelled.

“Haa…!”

With this sound, the blue saber flashes. A line appears on the ice block above our heads, and the severed surface collapses.

“And that.”

“Next obstacle is 12.6m ahead.”

Viscaria flatly notes as she checks the monitor display.

—Not again…

A little advance, and we have to stop, warning, cut, check clear. Sometimes, we have to do emergency checks on the malfunctioning Cradles. We’re going at the pace of three steps forward and two steps back, but there’s no other way out of this.

“Let’s go!”

I suppress the anxiety I have inside my head, and reach my head for the next ladder.

“Hah!”

And with a blue light gliding past the darkness, the ice fragments rain down the tunnel like hail. Ice, destroy, advance, ice, destroy, advance—this boring work continues, and everyone remains silent due to anxiety and uneasiness. “Ahh~ahh~, this is troublesome…!” Eisbahn alone is grumbling in such an atmosphere, and it’s strangely such valuable respite.

“Seriously, stop grumbling and get to work…!”

“Got it!”

“Yes, next!”

“Hehe…ahh, it’s because you like commanding robots, Amaryllis,”

He continues to swing the blade as he grumbles, the arcs so bold yet delicate. The destroyed shards of ice fall into the Path Canal, down the

path as planned.

“Ah, wait!”

At this moment, Viscaria calls out,

“What is it?”

“Hold here. It’s the checkpoint.”

She shines the light at the rocky wall of the tunnel, and there’s a horizontally hole.

—Ah…!

“The work tunnel…!?”

“Of course.”

I stare intently at the hole. Most of it is buried by the collapsed rubble, but there’s no doubt that it’s the work tunnel I used. I have been climbing the ladder and checking that the villagers are safe, and I never realized that we’ve arrived.

“Eisbahn!”

“Hehe. Looks like we’re going to dig there…oh my.”

Suddenly, he stops.

“What is it?”

“I guess it’s not my turn here.”

“Eh?”

At the next moment,

With a loud explosion, the rubble inside the tunnel are all blown aside. This power comes from the other side.

And then, a nostalgic voice echoes,

“Is everyone fine, no!?”

Robot=106\Human=103

“Yes, open your arms wide and move slowly! No need to rush!”

We build a bridge with enhanced wires, and have the villagers, totalling more than a hundred, pas through. Eisbahn waits under the bridge, making sure it won’t collapse.

“We’re here!”

The children pass through the bridge, and give me a smile, looking as though they just played an interesting game. I’m healed by their innocence.

“You worked hard there. Good good.”

I pat a child on the head, and the other children who crossed the bridge are yapping away, “Ahh, that’s too much. I want one too!” “Me too me too!” approaching me.

“No no, everyone’s crossing the bridge. Okay, next!”

A lot of time is needed to have more than a hundred villagers, but if anyone one is to slip off, it’ll be over; the villagers are resting at the outer wall of the tunnel at the end of the long ladder, giving relieved looks.

—Hm, very good. Looks like there’s some hope.

We’ve made it through less than half the journey, but there has yet to be any martyrs over the past three hours. It’s really wonderful to be able to reunite with Götz again after all that happened.

“We’ve take a little break here! Put all the Cradles next to the wall! Check on your conditions immediately! Anyone who needs parts can ask Viscaria here!”

I give the instructions, and start checking the Cradles that are lined deep into the tunnel. There are some with batteries that are overdrained, but the only thing we can do here is to switch over to power saving mode. Due to the earthquake, we lost almost half of our spare batteries. The electricity issue is almost critical.

"A hundred and three in total…?"

Including the Cradle from Götz, there are a hundred and three. After the checks, I fold my arms, and start to think. A lot of Cradles have batteries that can last for almost twenty hours, but there are quite a few that have only fifteen hours worth of battery. The Cradles can adjust the temperature accordingly based on the external air, and thus, there are variances in the rate the electricity is depleted.

"Götz, may I have a moment?"

"Is there something?"

"About the advanced team you went with…"

I ask tentatively, "Yes…" and Götz gives a grim look.

"Including this me, all hands were buried alive. Only I managed to escape successfully."

"…"

"I would have saved them, had it not be that they fell into the deep crack…"

Götz spoke grimly, "A failure am I." he lowers his head dejectedly.

"No, this isn't your fault. Nothing could be done about that earthquake."

—Ugh…

I bite my lower lip without anyone looking, and start checking on the Cradles again.

Our troubles continue.

“What? Can’t we just break through here?”

Eisbahn says with displeasure.

However, “That’s impossible.” Viscaria denies him immediately.

“If we continue moving forward, we’ll have to keep cutting blocks of ice. You’ll end up depleting all the electric power, and have to retire.”

“But…” Eisbahn stamps on the ground lightly. “How much of a detour will this be?”

“We got no choice here. We can’t waste our electricity, and we’ll have to use the path we have now, even though it’s a teour.”

“Surely in our masters’ world, there’s the saying ‘haste won’t do the job’.”

Götz too joins in the lecture, “Hmph.” Eisbahn looks extremely miffed.

“Whatever works for you.”

“Trust me here. Please, just once.”

It’s rare for Viscaria to be begging.

“Well, it’s not like I’m doubting your calculations here…”

Eisbahn looks all the more miffed, and stabs at the ice with his heel. This is a marking for cutting with the saber.

“Is this fine?”

“Mostly. It’s about two meters thick. Try digging it like it’s a manhole.”

“Yes yes.”

Eisbahn slouches his back, and follows Viscaria’s calculations as the Phantom Blade immediately gives off a blue light, stabbing right into the ground. He then moves his body around slowly, creating an arc.

After ten seconds, the cut off part sinks in, and a round hole appears like a hole on a frozen lake.

“So this leads into the underground tunnel?”

I ask as I look into the hole. It’s completely dark inside, and nothing can be seen.

“Right. Head East from here. We’ll finally reach the path leading to the surface. It’ll be a long detour, but this is the move that saves the most electricity.”

“I see…I’ll go first then.”

The electronic meter detects the depth to be at least ten meters. I lower the rope, check that it’s down, and enter the hope.

—How far more do we have to go?

As I head down the rope, I recall the words Eisbahn said,

He’s right too. We’re trying to hurry to the surface, yet we have to go down. This really gives an unappealing feeling. The other villagers are feeling the same, “Why are we heading back?” Daisy’s voice enters the wireless.

—Don’t get anxious. Don’t get anxious.

I continue to descend down the rope, shaping my legs. The hardness of the ice reach the soles of my feet, and I know I reach the bottom. How long will it take for us to lower the Cradles one by one? I feel really uneasy.

—Don’t get anxious. Haste won’t do the job. Haste won’t do the job.

I mutter to myself, as though I'm uttering a mantra, and I feel a little relieved.

I look up, and see a round full moon-like ring in the darkness. The villagers will be descending the rope from there.

Suddenly, I have a feeling that everyone's sucked into the darkness, and I can't help but quiver.

We continue on wordlessly in the dark tunnel.

Rsst, rsst. What we step on isn't snow, but the corpses of the work robots. It's one thing if they are metal plates shattered due to frostbite, it's eerie if they still had their limbs or heads intact. However, if we want to advance, we have to step over them.

"It's long…"

EIsbahn grumbles behind me. "Yeah…" I too mutter back. The little conversations we have ends here, and all that's left are some little mumblings.

And this heavy atmosphere lasts for an hour.

"Hey, aren't we there yet?"

I ask Viscaria.

"Ahh, it's near. Just a minute more and we'll reach."

She answers as she looks at the portable terminal. There are more than a hundred lights lined up in a row on the screen (These are us), and there are ten lights before us.

—Now we'll finally meet up.

We lost contact with no more than forty due to the earthquake. Given the directive, they'll continue to move up towards the surface, and this will be the first time we will be meeting other squads. Fifty meters, forty, thirty, we naturally increase our pace as we approach.

If we reunite, these isolated villagers, and our team will all be livened uo.

“Eh…?”

We arrive there, and what we see is the hill of rubble.

—An aftershock…!?

Aftershocks keep coming till this point, and a few times, we’re rattled by the collapsing dirt. This particular instance is really dire.

“Move the rubble aside!”

I instruct, and everyone get down to work, digging out this place where our friends may be buried under.

But,

As we keep digging them out one after another, we’re all left speechless.

“Uuu…”

We find our comrades amidst the rubble, each of them hugging the Cradle firmly. It’s obvious that they immediately protected their masters the moment they got buried.

“They’re all dead…” Viscaria checks them all, and reports to me with regret, “Their Mind Circuits are all cracked due to frostbite.”

They bodies look utterly mangled, due to the damage caused by the weight of the rubble and the cessation of electrical supply. The Mind Circuits in the center of the chest are completely shattered beyond shape.

“They, cut these off themselves…”

Eisbahn takes out a cable, and notes silently,

Looking closely, the cables are draped from the Cradles like an umbilical cord. Looking at how the cable remains undamaged, it's obvious the villagers took them off voluntarily.

—They offer their hopes of life to the Cradles.

If they had just obtained some electricity from the Cradles, they could have survived, but they never did so, not even for a minute, or a second. They shut off all possibility of living, and chose the path of letting our masters live.

—This is our mission, our raison d'etre. But…

"These fools…"

Eisbahn sadly mutters,

All ten villagers look peaceful, giving the expression of those who died after accomplishing their missions. The reason why their communicators are cut off is because they cut off the charging cables.

"Ahh…"

I let out a little sigh.

There are ten Cradles that manage to survive, and ten robots who sacrificed their bodies. All the other villagers can only stand still as they watch this.

"…Let's move them away."

I assign the salvaged Cradles to the villagers. The Cradles have exceeded the villagers in numbers, so some villagers, led by Götz, will carry multiple Cradles.

The villagers bury the corpses. Considering how little battery power is left, there's no other choice here.

A hundred villagers clasp their hands together as they stand in front of this little grave made of ice.

—Ugh…

I feel the anguish over the lost friends, and curse at my own helplessness as I lift my face, saying,

“Okay, let’s go.”

After a short funeral, we head off again.

Robot=106\Human=113

“From here on, we’re going to climb.”

We arrive at a fork, and Viscaria stops, looking up. There’s a slope forty-five degrees steep, and looking up from the bottom, it looks like a broken cliff.

“Ack, we can climb this thing?”

Like usual, Eisbahn remains unmotivated.

“Stop complaining. Let’s go.”

“Yes yes.”

I grab onto the wall of ice, as though ready to rock climb. It’s not difficult if I have to climb on my own, but it’s really not easy having to carry Cradles of two hundred kilograms while doing so.

“It’s a little steep. Don’t force yourself here, children! Eisbahn and I will pull you up with rope!”

“Ehhh, you serious?”

“What did you say?”

“Nothing.”

I feel the weight on my back with my fingertips as I climb with all my might. I feel that I expended quite a bit of battery power, but I’ll slip and fall if I don’t control my power output well.

Eisbahn and I watch the footing as we cautiously climb up. Soon after, the other adult robots follow. Viscaria instructs us on a path that's easy to climb, while the children are looking up at me worriedly.

After the short climb of about ten minutes, I put down my Cradle.

"Everyone, take it easy! There's not much time! Be careful!"

It's steep, but luckily, the slope isn't that high. After about twenty minutes, the adults have all finished climbing. Following that, the children have all climbed, and finally, we pull up the children's Cradles with rope. Götz, the strongest of us all, really put in a lot of effort during this time.

"Oraaahh, orraahhh...and we stop!!"

Many loops are wrapped around the Cradles, but the villagers cautiously pass them on one after another. Even after a long time, none of the hundred and so Cradles dropped. This is the best situation for us.

"Okay, five minutes rest!"

I want to rest for twenty, thirty minutes, but after considering the battery power, I decide against it. There's only twelve hours of electricity left. More than half has been depleted if we consider the initial twenty two hours planned.

—Can we last until the end?

We have few spare batteries at hand, and we're almost at our limit. I try to act as calm as possible as I observe the resting villagers. Over the past ten hours, they have been exerting gruelling manual labor, and thus, all of them are looking really weary.

Once rest time ends, we head off again.

But thirty minutes in, our worries become reality.

“Can’t go on…?”

I receive contact on the wireless, and have the other villagers stop.

I head to the back, and find a girl with a severed leg there. It’s Vicia, who has the ‘hopping pain’ and often visits Viscaria.

“What is it…?”

“E-er-erm…Vi-cia’s…body, power…”

The girl starts to utter some words, but her voice installation doesn’t seem adept. She’s looking weak.

—A malfunction..!?

I kneel down before the girl “Don’t move.” I have her lie on a flat surface. Then, I check on the girl’s Cradle.

’00:25:38’.

…Just this much…!?

There’s no more than thirty minutes of battery power left that’s indicated. Normally, in order to protect the data, the machine will become inactive if a robot has less than thirty minutes of power. It seems Vicia has encountered this situation.

“Wait. I’ll change your battery immediately!”

I open the battery unit of the Cradle, pick out a spare battery in my pocket, and inserts it.

—Please, work properly…!

After a slap, a little light runs in the girl’s eyes. With a deep thud, her petite body quivers.

Again, I check the remaining battery power on the Cradle ’08:31:47’, once I see the time, I can’t help but just feel relieved. It

seems it isn't a system malfunction, just a depletion of power.

"How do you feel?"

"Thank, you..."

The girl smiles weakly, and reaches her hand out. I grab her hand, and help her to her feet.

"I'm going back to the front now. If you don't feel fine, voice out. Understood?"

"Yes."

The girl nods weakly.

"...I see."

Upon receiving this report, Viscaria nodes silently.

"The original plan didn't require us to plan this far ahead..."

Basically, the remaining amount of battery power is deduced, and there are often errors in the actual count. Robots that are particularly aged, like the villagers will have depreciated greatly. They will have worn out further with these extremely harsh conditions and having to carry heavy objects of two hundred kilograms.

"The batteries these Cradles use are large, so I thought they would have lasted a little longer."

"I thought the same, but it's running out faster than we thought."

I know very well that exerting large amounts of force or moving heavy objects will expend more battery power. However, we never expected to run out of battery midway through the journey."

"Well, at this point, I don't want to say too much. It's due to the 'extraction'. The over-degradation of the machine causes the efficiency to be drained greatly. And after this, we're going to have

more people who can't move due to burned parts."

Viscaria hisses,

"Haa..."

I can only let out a sigh. At this point, we're helpless against the years of depreciation.

"Nothing we can do?"

"Nothing...just got to hurry."

"...I see."

We exchange this conversation, and continue to move on.

After that, like a dam bursting, one robot malfunctions after another.

Damaged parts, short-circuits, Mind Circuit freezer—various parts are malfunctioning, but the basic reason is due to the robots aging. Clearly, this is due to the many 'extractions' we had.

The spare batteries we have on hand are all quickly depleted, so we keep helping each other, supporting each other as we head forth. Those with electrical power left share their electricity, and those that can still move will carry those that can't.

But,

First, there are sirens.

"Beep." A shrill siren can be heard from the back.

"Cradle is malfunctioning! Hurry!"

"What's wrong!?"

"The internal temperature is dropping rapidly...!"

“Wait, I’ll be right there!”

I contact through the wireless as I run. Götz and Eisbahn follow me.

And when I reach, I’m left shocked.

—How did it…!?

That Cradle is completely white, as though frozen, and the indicated temperature is zero degrees. The human inside will be frozen to death.

“Viscaria…!”

“Wait a moment!”

Viscaria hastily checks on the Cradle. She frisks the control panel, and start tapping at the keys.

“Uuu…the temperature regulation function is malfunctioning…”

She let out the air, injected some oxygen, and boots the emergency system…then, Viscaria taps a few key commands, trying to get the temperature inside the Cradle back to normal.

But after ten minutes, her hands stop.

“What is it…?”

I ask tentatively.

“It’s useless. Nothing I can do.”

She moves her hands away from the keys, and retracts her feelers, indicating that the work’s over.

The human inside the Cradle—a male of about fifty years old—simply passes away silently. His body is completely white, the cause of death undoubtedly hypothermia.

“The air conditioning system is wrecked. I want to switch it out, but there’s no spare part…I’m really sorry.”

“No.”

I put my hand on her shoulder.

“You did good there. There’s nothing we could have done either.”

“Yeah. There was no choice…”

It’s rare to see Eisbahn give some encouraging words.

I stand up, and instruct the gathering villagers.

“Let’s bury this master.”

Robot=106\Human=112

We dig a shallow ditch into the ground, and lower the frozen Cradle in. It’s placed upright, so it stands upright like a grave.

We want to carry it back to the surface, but we don’t have much left in the tank. We don’t have enough strength to dig a hole a bury him.

After offering just a minute of words to soothe the soul, we leave the Cradle behind, and head on,

“The direct reason is due to the malfunctioning air conditioning regulatory system. However, this is merely a coincidence. The real reason here is due to ‘constant degradation’s—in other words, they’re suffering from the same symptoms as us.”

Viscaria states it as a matter of fact, but looking at her sidelong face, it’s obvious that she’s really miffed about this. I too am the same, and I’m shivering in frustration over my own helplessness.

—Again, I’m unable to save them.

It's an operation to save our masters, but none of us made it there. This huge amount of helplessness leaves me slightly furious.

And the tragedy continues,

"Cradle's dropping in temperature!"

"Emergency! Cradle's heating up abnormally!!"

"Please hurry! Master's!"

And within the next hour, another twelve masters die.

There are those who died due to the internal temperature dropping, abnormal heating, or asphyxiation—the reasons for malfunctioning isn't just due to constant degradation over the years, but also the physical damage from the prior collapse. In any case, we can't do anything without a change of parts, and can only watch our masters die one after another. The Cradles all end up as coffins, and then graves.

And within the next hour, another twenty one masters died.

Everyone else is at a loss on what to do. There's still electricity, but the Cradles themselves are still malfunctioning. Unlike the metallic robots, this underground world is an environment overly harsh to our masters with bodies of flesh. Without the life support devices of the Cradles, our masters can live for no more than five minutes.

Malfunctions happen, and at an increasingly rate.

We're unable to even bury them, and merely build up silver graves. Everyone remains silent.

Thus, the total dead extends to seventy nine.

Robot=106\Human=34

"Miss Amaryllis, may we have a moment with you?"

I receive a sudden request.

I turn around, and find Miss Ceolaria speaking to me. She once sand the 'Spearmint Genesis' at the Prayer Festival, and has the appearance of an old lady in her eighties.

"What is it?"

I turn around to face Miss Celorira. It's rest time, and Viscaria's doing diagnosis for malfunctions.

"I want to hand this over to you."

She hands over a large bag.

"This is?"

"Batteries."

"Eh?"

I open the bag, and see lots of portable batteries inside it. There's more than fifty of them.

"These are, issued to everyone? Why…?"

"There's no need for them." She silently notes, "I'll wait here until my body is wasted."

"Eh?"

At first, I don't know what she's talking about.

With a steady voice, Miss Ceolaria explains,

"There aren't many batteries left, but we're far from the surface. At this rate, everyone will surely be wiped out. In that case, we should at least end ourselves before the remaining batteries are depleted."

"We, as in, there are others?"

“Four senators, and the children, thirty in all. Besides them, there are another seventy two. These seventy two robots shall remain here and let their bodies be wasted.”

“B-but, if you abandon your bodies here…you’ll just be left with the Mind Circuits, right? Then there’s no guarantee that you’ll get your bodies again, that you’ll recover, right?”

I continue to ask Miss Ceolaria.

“We have prepared ourselves mentally. I have lived long enough, so please use the batteries on our masters and the children.”

“B-but.”

I look at the large number of batteries in my hands, and hoplessly mutter,

“I can’t accept these…”

At that moment,

“It’s fine, Miss Amaryllis.”

Cattleya’s voice enters the wireless.

“Miss Ceolaria’s right, everyone will fall if this keeps up. Also, given the reduction in cradles till this point, the remainder has become a burden. Please use these batteries.”

“Cattleya.”

I look over, and find Cattleya leaning on the ice wall, looking completely lethargic. Also, the villagers next to her are all leaning there, like some form of ritual going on.

“It’s fine! Don’t mind!” “We beg of you!” “We’ll leave them to you!” “Don’t worry, just use them!”

The villagers’ voices enter the wireless.

“Miss Amaryllis, everyone else has the same opinion.”

Miss Ceoloria extends her deep, aged wrinkles, smiling earnestly,

“Without us around, you can save enough battery power to save our masters. It is a selfish request, but we shall leave the rest to you.”

She lowers her head deeply,

“B-but, if that happens, everyone…”

I can’t hide the faltering look on my face.

Miss Ceolaria in turn looks rather peaceful,

“Please think of it this way. Us ‘adult robots’ have gone through lots of extractions due to our massive bodies. In other words, we’re more likely to malfunctioning, and waste more electricity. The child robots in comparison have done fewer ‘extractions’, and not much electricity depleted. Looking at the conservation of electricity, the chances of the child robots surviving are obviously higher.”

“Th-then I’m doing the same. I’m taking out my batteries.”

“You can’t.”

Miss Ceolaria shakes her head.

“Why not?”

“Without you around, who is going to lead these children? All the senators are indispensable for the following journey, so please take these batteries. P-please…”

And at this moment.

Her knees crumble, and she kneels.

“Miss Ceolaria…!”

I hastily carry her, but her body's lying prone without any strength. It seems her remaining electricity's depleted. Once the electricity from the Cradle is cut off, the emergency battery of a robot won't last for long.

And by the time I realize this, there's no other voices on the wireless. It isn't just Miss Ceolaria; Cattleya and the others are all lying on the floor, remaining still.

Right when I'm feeling completely befuddled, Viscaria's voice echoes through the wireless.

"Everyone entrusted their lives to you."

"Did..." I lower my eyes, asking, "Did you know about this, Viscaria?"

She nods slightly.

"Sorry for keeping this quiet. You would have definitely refused this, I felt. When Ceoloria came to discuss this with me, I went about convincing everyone. I was communicating privately to each other to avoid you detecting. If I didn't do so, no matter what, we wouldn't be able to return to the surface with the batteries on hand."

I clench my fist, and weakly let out.

"Sorry. I-I'm the Chief...but I got in your way."

"It's true that such a cruel way to solve this wouldn't be acceptable to you. However, it's because of your personality that everyone willingly gave up their lives for you."

"..."

Seventy two villagers cease to operate with peaceful expressions on their faces. "What's wrong?" "Are they sleeping...?" The children poke their heads out in curiosity.

—I have lived long enough.

Miss Ceolaria's voice again echoes. I look down at the batteries in my hands.

—Everyone, I'm sorry.

I bite my lips hard, feeling utterly painful within.

—I'm really sorry to everyone, for being such a useless Chief.

I continue to apologize profusely, and I grit my teeth, gripping the batteries in my hands hard.

Robot=34\Human=34

We continue to move on.

The number of villagers is reduced to thirty four. Other than Viscaria, Götz, Eisbahn and me, the other thirty are all children. The hope of reuniting with the other villagers has become increasingly bleak, and as the lights on the screen vanish one after another, my feelings start to turn gloomy.

The number of Cradles left is also thirty four, exactly the same as the number of villagers. All thirty four villagers carry a Cradle each. The operation to move three hundred Cradles has now dwindled down to so little.

But despite this, we have to keep moving.

I have a little attach case in my right hand containing more than seventy 'Mind Circuits'. These Mind Circuits belong to the villagers who took out their batteries willingly, including Cattleya and Miss Ceolaria. I don't know how long it'll take, but once we return to the surface, I'll definitely make sure to repair our friends and get them fixed. With my shoulders, I feel the weight of the case, and continue forward silently.

As time passes, I can hear the sound of the children sobbing. They hold in their tears, moving forward while carrying the heavy item, the string of tension in their hearts snapping away little by little.

And then, the sobbing become interrupted wailing, “Mama…” voices of those longing for relatives are mixed in. Over the past hundred years, the villagers who lived as relative robots have mostly lost contact due to the earthquakes, and the hope of reuniting is bleak. No matter who it is, anyone will have the urge to cry after losing their kin, and have bleak prospects before them.

The crying leads to a chain reaction, with some children even bawling out loud. “I can’t go on.” “I wanna go home.” Worse, the earthquakes strike like bandits, and even though they’re weak, the sobbing of the children become increasingly louder.

After some time, we pause our advance, and take a break.

“Viscaria, how long more until the next detour…?”

I ask Viscaria, who’s seated next to me, “Hmm…” she gives a grim look.

“The next detour will come in an hour.”

“After that?”

“I’m not sure.”

“Not sure…what do you mean?”

“In other words, we can only determine base on the collapse. We need to avoid those places completely blocked, and choose our route by process of elimination.”

“So can we make it back to the surface in time?”

“…Up to luck.”

Viscaria answers flatly. I make no further questions.

The children's crying continue on,

—Surely, they want to cry. It's such a dark place, such a heavy moment, such a tragedy.

I walk towards the source of the crying, and the thirty children surround me immediately,

"Si-sister...uu, ueee..."

"Okay, don't cry now."

I pat a girl on the head.

"Now sit down."

I sit down, and the children sit around me. They widen their moist eyes, staring at me intently. Surely they must be feeling very fearful, very uneasy.

Night comes, so sleep now.

A long night, a scary night.

But the night, will pass.

I sing, and the crying softens. The children stare at me incredulously.

Scary dreams, just forget them.

A long night, a cold night.

But the night, will pass.

The singing ekes from within the dark cave, and slightly, tender voices are mixed into the singing. Daisy sings, and the other children follow suit.

Sleep well, until dawn.

The long night, the painful night.

But the dawn, shall come.

I sing as I hug the children, and pat them on their heads.

Before I know it, everyone's singing away. Like the duet at the Prayer Festival, the beautiful resonating melody and voices surround us.

And in this deep underground, where the light can't reach us at all, we continue to sing happily as though it's a picnic with the sunlight shining on us.

We're getting closer to the surface.

"The remaining depth is twenty meters…no, fifteen."

Viscaria mutters as she looks at the terminal.

"Ah! This road! I was here before!"

I arrive at this familiar place, and start to feel emotional. Right, the one place I went to alone; I once stepped here while trying to make my way up.

—It's close. It's very close…!

My footsteps hasten increasingly, and finally ends up as a jog. The others too start to hurry up. After a while, I'm final confident. There's a little light shining in through the dark tunnel, and the wind blowing through the ice cave is undoubtedly from the outside.

—Just a little more…!

We advance towards the place with the light, and finally arrive at a spacious place. A wide ladder can be seen before this hill comprised of ice residue and rubble, and this ladder leads further up. There's an exit leading to a manhole.

I hastily climb the ladder, and push the exit with my hand.

"It's frozen?"

I take out the 'Black Pointer' in my pocket, and flip the switch. The Black Pointer gives off a little light, and I draw a line along the silhouette of the manhole. Bsst, with a melting sound, the manhole drops with a thunk. "Ouch!" I cup my head.

And then,

"Woah...!"

I leap out, and cheer in joy.

The land remains covered in ice, the winds remain freezing, and the weather isn't fine. Despite this, there's a weak light shining through the clouds, and surely it's the sunlight that gives life to this world.

—We did it, we did it...!

I raise my fist in elation. There's no doubt the Ice Age's about to come to an end.

I look around, three hundred and sixty degrees, over and over again, as though wanting to etch the scenery outside. The land covered in ice everywhere is an eyesore, but I can see a building with a sharp top at the horizon to the west—a large generator. It's right above the Snow White, and this shows that the distance inside the tunnel is rather long.

"Ahh..."

A trail of hot tears roll down my cheek. This world we've returned to after a hundred years is so vast, tall and far, bright, dazzling—an elation rising in my chest is causing me to quiver all over. Everyone else is looking around, patting the shoulders, sharing joy. Everyone's moved.

“Alright, everyone, let’s go!”

On my command, we start running. Our feet step on the frozen landscape as we head towards our destination. We shove aside the frozen snow, climb up the hill, running, running, falling over, getting up, and running again. The landscape remains as uneven as it was a hundred years ago, and we tumble and hustle as we head forward.

So we keep heading on, just a few hundred meters from the generator.

Suddenly, Viscaria yells,

“Warning detected on the monitor…massive heat source approaching…!!”

—Eh?

Everyone stop in unison to look at her—

And at that moment,

A blue light sweeps right above our head.

The light’s amazingly powerful.

It strikes past us, hitting the ground behind, and the ice on top splatters all over. Despite this, the light is not weakened in the least, as it pierces through the land, cuts into the ground, and forms a trail of white steam into the end of the horizon.

We’re all dumbfounded by this sudden turn of events, momentarily speechless. Our visual installations are dulled by a beat, our eyes still blurry. This light is too strong, like the sun shining into our eyes, and we seem to have hallucinating.

“Wh-what was that…!?”

I look towards Viscaria.

“Anyway, let’s get away from here! —Incoming second wave!”

The next moment.

A flash shines at us from the direction of the generator like dazzling stars, and another light fires through. A blue light, probably a laser, strikes before us, and shaves a lump off the frozen land before vanishing beyond the horizon. The silver-white land’s carved apart with a black line, dividing our group in two.

“Everyone scatter!... Find some place to hide!”

Even without the reminder, everyone too scene the danger they’re in, and start to move. Everyone’s scattering without my command, hiding in the mounds or in the ground.

“What was that...!?”

I hide behind a mound, looking towards Viscaria. The children are timidly clinging onto me.

“An anti-machinery compressed Crystal laser.”

Viscaria quickly explains, and raises her arm.

“That’s the culprit.”

She points in the direction of the generator.

—What, there...!?

There’s a robot standing there. It has thick, trunk-like limbs, and the pitch black, ominous body seem to absorb all the darkness. This black shadow stands before the generator with the sun shining upon it, like a gatekeeper, a pitch black demon in the world of white.

“That’s...!”

The repulsive memory awakens in my mind again. The people who panicked during end times, the lasers raining upon them, the

numerous blood columns splattering—s

"F-310."

Viscaria mutters,

"The most diabolical military robot in the world."



“Why is it attacking us!?”

“I don’t know either! Probably a defensive mechanism!”

“A defensive mechanism!?”

“We’re deemed as enemies! Like the masters who were charred black!”

“Enemies…”

I recall the ‘footage’ I saw. The military robots mercilessly killing those that are escaping, the burning horizon covered with corpses. Back then, the robots massacred those escaping to the Snow White and killed them all. Even after a hundred years, ‘this one’ is still obeying that order?

“Lady Amaryllis…!”

Götz’s voice rings through the wireless. I can see him at a mound slightly further away.

“Surely we will be wiped out if this continues..!”

“Wait, I’ll give the instructions now…!”

I look around to affirm the situation. At this point, there’s Viscaria and fifteen other children hiding with me under the mound, while Götz and another six are there, followed by Eisbahn and another nine children further away.

—What do I do…!?

The military robot stands still before the generator, and if we approach, surely we’ll be hit by that laser from before. Once we get out from this mound, there’s nothing to shield us, so there’s no place to hide.

—But the time…

There's only a minute left for the Cradle, and if we continue to hide, we'll end up with a freezing death.

I continue to seek a strategy, while Viscaria next to me is tapping at the panel intensively with her feelers. An upright model of that military robot is spinning on the screen, and the words describing its characteristics are crammed on it.

"Does it have any weaknesses...!?"

"I'm looking for them now!"

I fold my arms tightly, and Daisy looks at me worriedly. The children behind her are all looking teary, huddling together. The ice on the Cradles' surfaces have melted, and the water droplets are dripping like sweat.

—Got to think of something...

While I'm racking my brain.

"Third strike!"

Viscaria yells. We hurriedly get down.

The light again illuminates the world. The light seem to be prompting something as it hits a nearby pile of dust, and a large amount of dirt rain down. The terrified children are shrieking in fear.

"F-310 approaching!"

The situation has become direr by the moment.

"Sixty, fifty nine, fifty either, fifty seven...!"

—Approaching...!?

I see the robot drag its massive body towards us in a languid manner. Even after a hundred years of Ice Age, its eyes remain sharp as ever.

—We'll get killed!

There's no reason needed. The bare killing intent is such a terrifying thing.

—Wh-what do I do!?

On one side, we have a military robot decked with heavy armor, and on the other side, we have common civilian robots; excluding the children, we have only four combatants. The enemy has a long distance laser, and we have nothing, not even a device to fly with.

—But we can't get away.

First, it's impossible to run away while carrying the heavy Cradles. If we do so, our batteries will be depleted, and we'll be unable to move.

"Thirty meters more!"

The robots have approached us, and the children are hugging me firmly.

—Got to figure out something to divert his focus!

"Listen up, everyone! I'll be bait! Take this chance to escape, children!"

I convey my thoughts to everyone through the wireless, only to be refuted by Eisbahn immediately.

"What nonsense are you saying now!? You're going to be burned to crisp once you get out there!"

"But there's nothing else we can do!"

"Calm down! We can figure out something from his attacks!"

With a calm tone, he says,

"That guy's unable to grasp our exact locations! If it could, we would have been burned to crisp on its first shot! Its hearing installation and heat sensors may have been destroyed, just capturing enemies with its visual installation!!"

"So, what do you mean!?"

"Too troublesome to explain in detail! I'll show you proof!"

From his hiding spot, Eisbahn throws out a piece of shattered ice. The ice rolls on the ground, and suddenly, it's covered by light; the laser shaves off the place the ice lands on.

"You see that?"

Clear as day.

"That guy attacks anything that moves immediately."

The operation's simple.

I'll be bait and run with all my might, luring the robot behind the mound. Götz and Eisbahn will the flank and attack. Viscaria will watch the screen and give instructions on the timing.

The chances of winning is minimal. However, with the looming threat impending, there's no time to create a more intricate strategy, and no matter how reckless this strategy, we can only roll the dice on it. We have to protect the children and Cradles no matter what.

"Target's just ten meters away…!"

Viscaria calls out through the wireless. The robot's right before us; I duck in the shadows, waiting for the moment to charge out. I leave behind the Cradle for the time being, and continue to maintain operation through the emergency battery. We need to settle this within ten minutes.

Pew, Eisbahn tosses a pebble. It gets detected by the robot, and it

stops immediately.

—Now...!

I immediately dash out. After several seconds of sprinting, I leap into the ditch in the ground. At the same time, a blue lightning fizzles past my head, and the echoes strike my hearing installation, making me feel repulsed.

—How about this...!?

The robot sense my existence, and hastens towards me. It seems the plan to lure his attention worked.

—Alright, come here!

I hide in the shadow, waiting for the opportune moment.

—I'm here!

The sound of the robot's footsteps Loom. The land of ice is steaming all over, like a carpet covering it. This power able to topple the landscape cause me to shiver.

"—Another three steps."

Viscaria's voice echoes. This is followed by heavy footsteps.

"Two!"

Another footstep.

"One!"

I raise the 'thing' in my hand.

"Zero!"

The moment the robot steps forward, I raise the rod-shaped item—the heating headlight called the 'Black Point'—and toss it at the nose

of the robot. The heating headlight spins and glows, luring the robot's attention, but it'll take some time to aim and fire at an object up close. The headlight lands on the ground, and the robot swings down its heavy arm. This weight of the arm cause the robot to tilt forward, and lose its balance slightly—at this moment.

Two shadows creep in from behind the robot.

A red light flashes through, exploding on the back of the robot. The moment the explosions and sparks fly, Götz appears. The robot stumbles, and the blue light flashes as Eisbahn's Phantom Blade, hitting it right in the face. Götz follows up after Eisbahn, striking with the 'iron arm', second, third, fourth, fifth, both of them launch continuous attacks. It's a scene of a black sandbag being pummelled again and again. The red and blue lights continue to appear like explosions in an old movie. Finally, the robot falls forward.

—We beat it...!

Everyone has this thought. In fact, Viscaria's cheering in the wireless. I too hop out from the ditch.

But.

At this moment, the robot's eyes light up.

And its massive body starts to move. Even after such continuous attacks, it remains unscathed.

—This thing's way too durable, isn't it...!?

The world lights up again. Götz and Eisbahn attacks from the side, and explosions echo. However, the robot—ahh, how is that possible—it remains unscathed, unmoved.

And then, it's the robot's turn to work. With its massive arm, it shoves Götz in the opposite direction, sending him flying with a sweeping punch. Eisbahn uses this opportunity to swing the Phantom Blade, but the blue blade which he boasted could cut anything merely

gives off sparks, and it gets repelled without being able to damage the armor. With the momentum of a large heavy machinery charging forward, the robot lunges at Eisbahn, who's sent flying in this attack, landing and bouncing hard on the ground due to recoil.

And so the robot continues to move forward, as though nothing has happened.

—Ah, ahh…

It's unbelievable. We carried out our strategy perfectly, and both attacks landed. However, they're beaten without any result to show for it. Götz lands headfirst into the ground, and Eisbahn's lying prone by the side.

"You're kidding…"

Viscaria's voice is almost a shirek. We lost our reliable duo, and we're rooted to the spot. The robots approach us; I can't move, and neither can Viscaria. One step, two steps, three steps. Ahh, we're going to die. It's over, we're going to be killed. We finally made it all the way here—

I close my eyes. At this moment,

Thunk, a sound echoes, and a small pebble rolls over.

—Eh!?

The demon notices the pebble, and after a pause, it slowly changes its direction. It notices the back of the mound—the place where the children are hiding.

—This is bad!!

The children glared at by the black demon starts to shiver. They shield the Cradles behind them with their bodies, frozen in fear as though witnessing a mass murderer invading a childcare center.

And then, the robot raises its arm. The massive arm has a barrel, and it's charging up. Also, it's aiming at the children.

—Ah, ahh.

"Sister!" "Amaryllis!" "Welcome back!" "Hug me!" "I want petting." "Sing something." "Aching pain." "I can't sleep." "I love you." "Welcome home!" "Today, today." "I did a lot today!"

—Everyone...! This big sister is, going right now...!

The voices of the children echo in my Mind Circuit, and I leap up to chage out.

"Yahhh!!"

I head straight towards the robot, and slam into it hard with my shoulder. However, my body's bounced back by the thick armor, and I tumble back.

"Over here...!"

I shout. This is to divert the robot's attention from the children.

"Your opponent is me...!! Come here...!!"

And the robot again turns towards me. It loads up energy in its arm, and the barrel's targeting my face—the distance is so close, I can feel the white smoke oozing from the barrel spraying on my face.

"Everyone, run!!"

The moment I yell, a blue light flashes by. Right when I think I'm dead, an explosion echoes behind. The lasesr misses.

"Waaahhh!"

A yell comes, and the robot's leg is hugged by a red haired lady.

"The next shot is coming!! Only the right arm has a weapon!

Watch for enemy movements! Anyway, stall for time!!”

Viscaria quickly gives instructions as she hugs the robot’s leg. The sound of her shoulder and hair being burned is ever so clear.

—Right, got to buy some time...!!

I stand up, and adjust myself. I look over, and see the children running to the generator while carrying the Cradles. Even if it’s just a minute, we need to delay the enemy here.

“Watch its movements! It’s slow and easy to predict!!”

Viscaria stumbles about as she gives instructions. Following her instruction, I capture the robot’s movements with my eyes. The robot’s trying to aim at Viscaria at its leg.

—I won’t let you!

I immediately grab the right arm of the robot, and then, the robot strikes at me without mercy..

—Ahh!!

The powerful energy tries through my body, and my left leg—

Is instantly reduced to dust.

At that moment,

“You bastard!!”

This time, Viscaria climbs onto the face of the robot. The robot’s line of sight is blocked, and obviously somewhat erratic; it raises its left arm, smacking at her body.

In an instant, Viscaria’s body—or rather, the area around the waist is jammed in by the five fingers of the robot, her body’s stabbed through, and her Circuits are pulled out—

Viscaria's shattered.

But even though her body's ripped into half, she continues to exhibit the will to fight. She extends her feelers, latches onto the robot's head tightly, and keeps tapping at something. Finally, the robot becomes irregular in motion, merely flailing its arm about as though its eyes are covered. Viscaria has disabled the external sensors; this really is a combat style befitting a master technician.

I too continue to fight my way. I latch at the robot's arm firmly, trying my best not to be thrown off. I continue to keep my balance, just as I always do on the icemobile, and keep stalling for time.

But the resistance doesn't last for long.

The robot swings its arm violently at us, shooting the laser everywhere, and my vision flickers like disco lights. Viscaria's again ripped apart, the flying Circuits spilling like intestines. Finally, Viscaria's sent flying away, knocking into a mound, and rolls onto the ground like a rag cloth.

Then, it's my turn. The robot smashes me onto the ground as I keep latching at the right arm. With the arm and the floor clashing, my chest is being pressed upon, and it collapses along with an unnerving cracking sound. I spit out lots of grease, my vision's completely gone, and quite a few parts have flown out. Then, I drop.

"Ah, uu...ahh, uu..."

My voice installation have malfunctioned, and the groans ooze out along with grease. My body's heating, the sirens in my mind wailing, my chest is giving off sparks, and my body's bouncing about, writhing.

The black demon's closing in on me. I stab my dislocated left arm into the ground, and reach out my right arm, with half the fingers fallen off, trying to help myself off the ground. However, the circuits beneath the chest are all damaged, and my body can't act accordingly.

The robot looms in on us. My final thoughts are whether the children managed to get away successfully, whether the Cradles are fine. If so, that's fine; it's great to be able to help everyone—

Mentally, I brace for my impending demise.

A scarlet red.

At first, it's Götz. The robot senses him, and the moment it turns around, Götz's 'iron arm' is giving off a red light. The full impact explodes on the robot's right arm, and the massive right arm of the robot splatters. "Cavalry—" he lands the final blow, "Is the embodiment of thy soul."

His iron arm's giving off a red light, clashing with the right arm of the robot.

The impact rips through the air, and the explosion engulfs the world in a wave. After a pause, the light dissipates, and Götz's right arm—no, the right half of the body—is turned to dust, and vanishes. Götz's left only with the head and upper body, lying next to Viscaria, unable to move.

But even so, the robot stands there. Its right arm is smoking, and the gun is open and melted. Following that—

A blue light

"The one thing I hate most in this world—"

The blond guy stands at where Götz was. Right when the robot's raising its right arm, Eisbahn stabs his right arm into the barrel of the robot—like a certificated kept back in a cylinder.

"Is a bastard who attacks women, you know?"

Then, he exhibits maximum power. The right arm storing the Phantom Blade gives off a blue light, and the robot's right arm expands as though engulfed in flames; the joints in the brain, arm,

and limbs are all giving off blue light.

At the final moments, the robot shrieks. The shrill cry echoes through the world of ice, and the iron man faces the sky. To me, it sounds like a cry.

And then, the robot explodes.

It's like rain.

The shrapnel falls upon us, and the dust that flew buries the surrounds. I lie face up, my consciousness blurry as I watch the falling shrapnel. Several bits of what used to be a military robot smack my body, giving off a sad clunching sound.

After the rain of shrapnel, Eisbahn stands before me and looks down, "You alright…?" he asks.

—Ah…

My lips move, but I can't eke out a voice. "I see." I nods slightly. Then, he knees down, and falls towards my upper body.

—Eisbahn.

I lift my left arm that's dislocated and like rotting wood, touching him.

"Hey…Eis-ba-hn…"

Hearing my call, he, lying on my body, moves slightly. His body is stabbed with shrapnel, and I realize it's caused by him shielding me from the explosions.

Thus, both of us continue to lie around.

Then, he says,

"Ama…ryll, llis…"

“Wh-at…?”

I can’t move my body, and say to him as I look down. He too looks at me.

Then, he smiles,

“Fine…?”

“Yeah…”

I answer this exact same question as before in a groogy manner.

“Fine, huh…?”

“Y-eah…?”

My voice is barely audible, and he says,

“That’s, good.”

Then, the conversation ends.

Our bodies intertwine as we feel each other’s warmth.

This continues for who knows how long.

And I, feeling his weight, can only space out and look up at the sky.

Mind Circuit=Viscaria

In my blurry vision, **I** sense the end looming.

My lower body’s completely blown off, and my safety cables in my ripped abdomen are giving off sparks. Strangely though, I feel very calm. It’s probably because all my functions are damaged that my Mind Circuit is in a state of false death.

Before I know it, Götz is beside me. His right half is gone, and the remaining left half is completely disfigured.

“Götz...”

I call out for him, with a teeny-weeny voice.

“What...is it, you ask...?”

He responds, but it sounds like a processed, robotic voice,

“You...still alive...?”

It’s a stupid question. But this is the one thing I really want to know.

“Still...alive...am, thy...”

“Oh...then, good...”

We continue to converse without moving. This is the only thing we can do.

“Götz...”

“What...do you ask...?”

“What about, the rest...?”

“Not sure...am I...here...”

“Oh...”

I want to turn my eyes, but my vision’s fixed, and I can’t move. I can’t move my head, and my wireless is damaged.

Thus, I can only continue to converse with Götz.

“Still, alive...?”

“Still, alive...yes...”

I ask again. At this point, I just want to hear his voice.

“Götz...”

“What, do you ask...?”

“Still alive...?”

“Yes...still alive...am I...”

Within the few seconds, I continue to repeat the same question. Without doing so, I have a feeling that I’ll be pulled into the dark abyss of fear. Having lived for more than a hundred years, I finally realize, so robots do fear death.

“Still...alive...?” “Still...alive...am I...” “Still alive...?” “Still alive...am I...” Such a rhetorical conversation continues like a process. Götz’s left hand is hold my right hand, the warmth of his palm so inexplicably adorable, and leaves me elated.

“Götz...”

“...”

There’s no answer.

“Götz...?”

I keep call for his name, and timidly open my eyes. His silver body, stained in black grease, is completely dented as he remains still.

I close my eyes, and with a quivering voice, I finally ask,

“Have you already passed on...?”

Mind Circuit=Amaryllis

“Amaryllis...?”

Aid comes soon after. I open my eyes, and see Daisy looking down at me with teary eyes. I smile at her, and the girl with the chestnut hair starts bawling away, the tears dripping onto my face. It’s all

over.

After that, we're saved by the children.

I open my eyes, and the sky looks more dazzling than ever I, basked under the scorching sun, is dyed a complete white in my vision. The world's so bright after all; my heart heats up, and tears continue to fall.

Once we reach the generator, the power output is restored. The children have been working hard, attaching all the cables of the Cradles to the generator as according to the manual.

I got repaired to a state where I'm able to talk normally. The hole in my chest is filled with an alloy, but the severed left leg is unable to be recovered.

Eisbahn's body is stabbed with shrapnel due to the impact of the explosion; his functions have ceased, but luckily, the Mind Circuits isn't damaged. Once he regains consciousness, he looks at me listlessly. For the third time, he asks the same question, "You alright…?" "I'm fine." With tears in my eyes, I embrace him.

Viscaria's overly damaged, and thus, her Mind Circuit repairs shall be left alone for the time being. It'll be dangerous if we can't find a place with better facilities to repair her, and thus, her Mind Circuit's kept in a box, kept for moments of it.

Götz is dead. His Mind Circuit is completely shattered, and everyone knows it can't be repaired. The only thing we can find of him are the fragments of the silver mask, and we store them inside Viscaria's box.

After approximately twenty hours, this long operation finally comes to an end.

—Chief…

Standing before the Cradles that are lined up neatly, I make my

report again.

—Our masters have finally made it to the surface.

There's a baby inside a Cradle; it's the one Daisy and Gappy did their best to protect.

—Gappy, we did it...

The number of Cradles we managed to save is thirty four in total. There were three hundred and more at the start of this operation, so we lost approximately ninety percent. We succeeded, but the cost to attain this result is way too much.

"Sleeping soundly now..."

The baby in the Cradle is sleeping well. There's an air conditioning installed in the central control room of the generator, and thus no worry that the Cradles will freeze.

"The batteries?"

"Gathered them...well, more or less."

Saying that, Eisbahn pours out the batteries from his pockets. There are dozens of Cradles lined up in the room, and I can't help but think of this as a bird's nest due to the egg-shaped objets.

"Hey, why aren't you sleeping, Amaryllis?"

Daisy asks curiously, "Well," I pat the girl on the head, saying,

"We'll be coming over to sleep soon. We need to make sure the Cradles are working fine first though."

"I see..."

Daisy seems to understand as she looks inside the Cradle. The baby she saved is sleeping there.

“Gabriella White.” There’s the name etched on the nameplate. “It’s a girl.” Daisy narrows her eyes, muttering with emotion.

“Hey, Amaryllis.”

“What is it?”

“Why are the robots going into the Cradle to?”

At this point, Daisy’s lying inside another Cradle next to the baby. There are spare Cradles inside the generator, and this is one of them. All the other children are asleep.

“The Cradle’s very good at temperature control and isolating from the outside air. It’s very effective in preventing frostbite.”

“Heh…”

“We’ll leave everyone to you.”

I look over at the case Daisy’s holding. It contains the Mind Circuit of the villagers.

“What about you, Amaryllis?”

“I’m fine. My remaining battery can provide warmth.”

“I see.”

“So now, it’s time to sleep well.”

“Uu…”

Daisy closes her eyes quietly. She switches to sleep mode, and lets out a steady breathing.

“Good night, Daisy.”

I slowly close the lid of the Cradle.

There are two rows of Cradles lined side by side. One of them is for the human children, and the other is for robot children. Looking at this symbolic scene, I show a smile on my lips. All of them are sleeping with a peaceful face, and this reminds me of the nap room in the kindergarten I worked in.

“Daisy might be angry when she wakes up again.”

“Most likely.”

Eibshan looks down at the Cradle, “I never thought this will be goodbye.” He said,

It’s true that the Ice Age is coming to an end, and the temperature on the surface will rise. But other than here, we don’t know how many humans have survived, unable to tell when they will be saved. As for whether they can make it here before the electricity in the generator runs out, it’ll be down to luck.

Thus, we decide to cut off the remaining electricity provided. This includes the lighting inside the generator, the air conditioning, and we too—will give up on maintaining our functions. Maintaining a damaged body will expend more electricity than a normal one, and there’s a risk of power leakage. More than anything, I want the children and masters to have an increased chance of living, even if it’s just a little. This is my responsibility as Chief.

“Sleeping nicely there…”

Eisbahn marvels as he looks down at the Cradles. The children are sleeping peacefully within, but the babies are holding their little fingers, as though grabbing something precious.

“I se..”

“Hm?”

“Shall we sleep?”

Eibshan pulls my hand. Back then, I would have shaken it off in annoyance, but not now.

I hold his hand, and answer,

“Yes.”

Mind Circuit=Eisbahn

“…Hey.”

“What?”

“The winds…sure are strong, huh?”

“Yeah.”

I tersely answer, and tenderly stroke the girl’s hair.

The blizzard can be heard howling outside, but it isn’t entering the generator.

The Cradle beside my head is giving off a weak light, slowly waiting until the time to wake up.

At my elbow, the girl’s body is shaking. Her body temperature is dropping to its limits.

“…Cold?”

I embrace the girl with more strength than before.

“No, I’m fine…”

I won’t feel cold if I switch off the sense installation completely. However, I haven’t, as I still wish to feel the warmth of the girl.

“Hey, Eisbahn.”

“Hm?”

“Who are you exactly?”

This sudden question is posed at me.

“...Huh? What do you mean?’

I ask suspiciously, and the girl stares right at me.

“You never mentioned about your past at all...”

“...You want to know?”

“Yeah.”

I never mentioned this to anyone before. However, if it’s just today —just to this girl alone, I might consider.

“—I.”

It’s a long time back since I talked about this.

“I was a butler robot.”

“...Butler?”

“Yeah.”

“Butler...as in, the person who serves in a mansion?”

“Yeah.”

I give a serious look, “...Pffft.” But the girl chuckles,

“It-it doesn’t suit you...not at all.”

“You.”

“So I say...”

I press down on her head hard with my elbow, “Ow ow.” And the girl sounds out,

“That’s why I hate mentioning the past.”

“Sorry, sorry…so how was your time as a butler?”

The girl’s still smiling, “I don’t want to talk about it.” So I refuse. But with her going at it again and again, I finally relent. In the end, I’m never able to reject any of this girl’s requests.

“…I worked in that mansion for a long time. There’s a ‘lady’ there, and I was living with her, in charge of taking care of her.”

“Ohh.”

“And then”

As a butler robot, I took care of that ‘lady’. She’s weak, and her father forbade her from stepping out from the mansion.

But one day, I took the lady out as I wanted to show her to outside world no matter what. It’s merely half a day, but this secret outing left her really delighted.

In the end, this matter was made known to the master of the mansion. As I had defied orders, I was fired.

“I was fated to be scrapped. Milady however wanted to elope with me, to a land far away, and live together…but I couldn’t. I said goodbye to her, and escaped the mansion. Soon after, she passed away.”

The girl remains silent. Before I know it, my usual cocky tone has vanished, and replacing it was the formal language I had during my butler days.”

“Actually, milady knew she would meet her end soon, and wanted me to bring her out. However, I never did so. I thought it was for her own good. Thus, I never fulfilled her final request in life…”

My hands start to tremble. The girl holds my hands, trying to calm

me down.

And then, she suddenly says this,

“That lady…resembles me?”

—!

“…That’s.”

I’m stunned. I wanted to keep this a secret until the very end.

—So this is it?

“Blue hair, pretty, elegant, noble, and firm-willed.”

“I’m embarrassed to be praised by you like this.”

“Idiot, I’m not talking about you.”

My tone reverts to the usual.

The blizzard becomes stronger, and the winds sound like a whistle. The temperature drops, and our bodies are freezing, frozen like ice. Despite this, we continue to embrace each other, wanting to freeze as one.

“…Hey.”

“What?”

“Keep singing.” That song.”

“Which one?”

“The song you like.”

The girl looks up at me for a moment, “Ahh, that.” And smiles.

And then, she sings,

Sleep well, sleep well, sleep well for today.

I shall continue to hold you in my arms, so sleep well.

One day, even if this country, is wiped out, the morning light,

Everything, and anything, is for, you.

That is why, sleep well, for today.

Until, the day, you wake up again.

Once she finishes singing, I give a little whistle.

“Sure is a nice song no matter when I hear it.”

“Thanks.”

“Feel like sleeping the more I hear it.”

“Are you praising me?”

“Of course.” I answer. Whenever I heard this song, my chest will heat up.

And so, this conversation ends.

We continue to embrace each other, leaving our bodies to the passing of time.

Mind Circuit=Amaryllis

While my battery is almost drained.

He gets up.

“Eisbahn?”

I call his name. I can’t use any strength. My battery’s past its limit, I guess?

"...Back then."

He's fiddling with something in his hand, saying slowly,

"I mentioned this question before, didn't I—If there's a situation where you can't 'halve' it, what will you do?"

"?"

In the face of his sudden question, "Ahh, yeah." I can only answer ambiguously.

— If there's a situation where you can't 'halve' it, what will you do?

This was the conversation I had with him before we left.

—Assume that you are in a river, nobody will save us in a while, and we're running out of battery. If we just leave this be, both of us will die of frostbite. There's only one battery left. What will you do?

"You did say that. So?"

"back then."

Eisbahn continues with the work,

"This was how you answered—there's only one battery, so I'll give it all to you. Then we'll have saved each other's life once—and that's halving."

"Uh, huh..."

At that moment, a gripping feeling strikes my chest. I don't know why, but it's probably due to how kind his expression is.

"Hey, Eisbahn."

"What is it?"

"What have you been doing?"

“I’ve been thinking.”

He doesn’t answer my question,

“You talked about the future of ‘halving’. However, I do feel that you can be a little greedier. You control your life, and nobody can half it. Everything belongs to you. It can’t be given to anyone else.”

“Eisbahn?”

I can see the battery he’s holding in his left hand. His chest is already open, and I see the motherboard and cables.

“This is my battery. It still has some power, so use it.”

Then, he gently inserts it into my chest.

“What are you trying to do?”

“I’m trying to save you. So I’m giving my battery to you.”

“Eisbahn, stop.”

I want to refuse, but my body can’t do.”

“It’s useless. Even if you do so, I won’t be saved.”

“That’s enough.”

He gives a self-depreciating smile.

“It’s useless. I’m just happy. If this can increase the chances of you being saved, I’ll be happy with that.”

He takes out the flower medal from his neck, and gently hangs it over mine.

“After escaping the mansion, I was wandering around, restless. I was wandering the city like a city, spending every single day like this...but when I arrived at the village, I met you, and I was reborn.

You're already so serious, so honest, so straightforward, so innocent, more hardworking than anyone else...I like these parts about you, and I feel blessed for that...thus."

Finally, he gives a tender smile.

"If there's only one life, I'll give it all to you. I shall take away all your love. This shall be a one for one—halving."

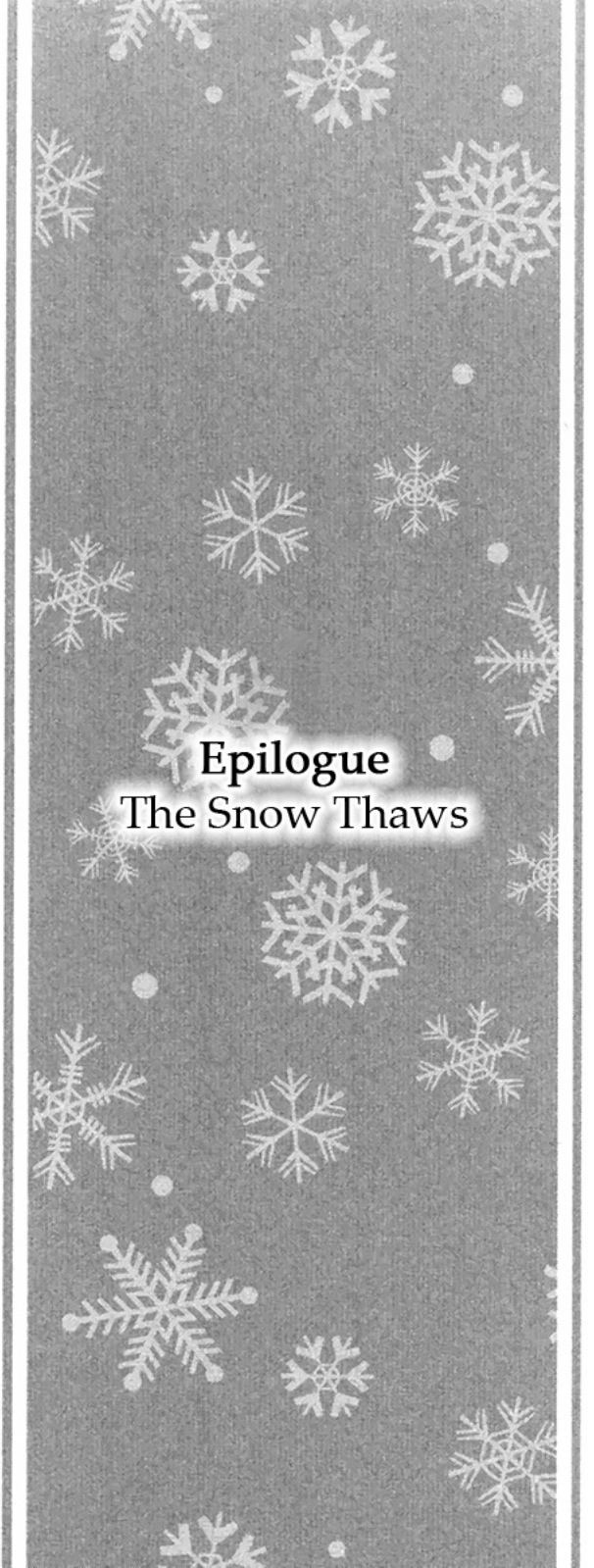
After that, he never moves.

His body becomes increasingly cold, and I keep embracing him.

Warm tears trickle down my cheeks, and finally frozen.

The sound of the blizzard continues.





Epilogue
The Snow Thaws

Epilogue – The Snow Thaws

After the long Ice Age ends, the world finally thaws.

Humans again continue to weave humanity. With the assistance of robots, he few humans who evacuated to the shelters and survived over a long period of time built little villages, developed lands, and slowly moved towards the path of recovery.

And as recovery passes, 'rescue squads' are dispatched everywhere to investigate. These rescue squads managed to gain much, and they saved many survivors in isolated villagers or deep underground. In one instance, they managed to save more than a thousand in a shelter, and in another, they found many corpses within.

The discovery of our Cradles happened a long time after the rescue squads were dispatched.

"We found survivors!"

Upon hearing this, the rescue squad members doubted their ears.

"Where...!?"

They run as the leader called out. "Over here!" the young member shouted, and the door of what appeared to be a control station opened.

There were dozens of long-term cryo installations—commonly known as 'Cradles' lined up there. Each of them was glowing weakly.

"This is unbelievable..."

The leader looked inside the Cradle, sounding startled. These Cradles were connected everywhere through dozens of cables, and appeared to be eggs in a warm nest.

“Robots?”

The leader kept looking at the Cradles intently.

“Looks like it. Most likely the robots used to manage the evacuation.”

“How’s their condition?”

“Extremely good. Very likely that they can be repaired.”

“Good, move them back to base first. We’ll ask them about the details.”

On the leader’s command, dozens of Cradles were carefully moved out by the members.

“The underground evacuation facility here should have ceased to operate already.”

The leader muttered in shock as he watched these Cradles.

“Leader!”

“What now?”

“What do we do with these?”

“Hmm…?”

And then, the leader finally sensed the two riobots lying inside the room.

One of them was a girl with blue hair, and the other was a blond man.

Strangely, there was a cable extending from the man’s chest, and a battery attached to the girl’s chest.

“He definitely tried to save the girl.”

The young member noted sadly,

The leader wiped away the ice on his mustache and muttered, “Most likely.” These two embracing each other tightly appeared to be intimate lovers.

At this moment, the leader recalled his dead wife when the end came. He kept embracing her until the very end to save his wife from being frozen. However, his wife died, and only he lived. He joined the rescue team that faced such perils, all for the sake of making up for being unable to save his wife.

“What do we do? They look really damaged here.”

The young man asked.

“Yeah…”

Then, the leader noticed a little medal hanging on the robot’s neck. ‘108th Grand Prix Winner Amaryllis Alstroemeria and Eisbahn Tricrytis’.”

On a closer look, the two robots were thoroughly damaged due to frostbite. There’s a low chance of fixing them, but their peaceful sleeping faces made them seem alive.

After hanging the icy cold medal to the girl, the leader said, “Take them away.”

Mind Circuit=Amaryllis

I have a dream.

Inside this dream, there’s me, Eisbahn, Viscaria, Götz, Daisy, Gappy, Chief—all the villagers are gathered together.

In this dream, the Prayer Festival’s at its loudest, and everyone’s singing and preparing. Shipping materials, delivering them, discussing the performances on the stage. It’s just a normal day, yet I love it so

hopelessly. Thinking about how such days won't return again, I keep singing as I cry. It's a strange dream. And then— "—llis."

Someone's calling my name.

"Miss Amaryllis, do you hear me?"

—Who…is it…?

I open my eyes, and sense light. It's a dazzling light; it's a warm light.

"Ah."

There's a woman dressed in pink nurse uniform. Short hair, large eyes, a young looking nurse.

"Please wait a moment….doctor! Doctor!"

The nurse immediately scampers out to the corridor, and loudly calls for someone.

A minute passes, and the nurse manages to bring the doctor in.

The doctor's a woman. She's in a white robe, her long red hair tied behind her.

"Oh my, you're finally away, sleeping beauty?"

Upon hearing the doctor's voice, I look at her in shock. This voice is familiar.

"Ohh, you finally noticed? How sharp." The doctor smiles, "When I was reborn, they modified my face slightly, but at least they managed to preserve the hair color and voice base."

"Is that you…Vis, caria…?"

"Yes it is."

That doctor—Viscaria extends her feelers from her fingertips.

“Ahh…ahhh…”

“It’s been a while, Amaryllis.”

I stare at her in shock. Viscaria briefs me on what happened back then. After being found, fifteen years passed, and the Ice Age approached the end. Our masters awoke in the evacuation shelters, and the world’s slowly moving towards recovery.

“Here, have a look.”

Viscaria hands me a mirror.

“Ah.”

I see a girl with long blue hair reflected in the mirror. The skin’s abnormally white, and those the eyes have gone from blue to dark blue, there’s no doubt that it’s me.”

“Ah, ahh.”

I stare at the mirror in shock.

And then, there’s something shining on the chest. ‘108th Grand Prix Winner Amaryllis Alstroemeria and Eisbahn Tricrytis’

That flower medal.

—Eisbahn.

With trembling hands, I raise the medal.

“I duplicated it with a crystal to avoid it from melting. It’s the same inside.”

“Eisbahn…”

I ask, and Viscaria shakes her face with an anguished look.

“I see…”

If there’s only one life, I’ll give it all to you. I shall take away all your love. This shall be a one for one—halving.

I grab the medal firmly, and mutter, “Farewell…my Eisbahn.”

At this moment.”

“Hey, stop pushing!” “I heard Amaryllis has woken up!?” “I wanna meet her—”

The hospital door opens, and a crowd swarm in like an avalanche. There’s probably more than thirty, and I can hear more footsteps on the corridor.

There are some I have never met before. Some are adults, and some are children.

But I can tell on one glance. Their expressions, vibe, familiarity.

“Hey hey, this is a hospital. Settle down now.”

Viscaria shrugs,

“Every, one…?”

“Amaryllis!”

The children swarm in. The first to leap over is a girl with chestnut hair.

“Amaryllis, Amaryllis, waahhhh!”

“Daisy!?”

She rubs her face on my chest as she sobs. The other children too shove each other as they approach me, gathering around my bed.

Looking closely, there’s a little medal on Daisy’s chest too. It’s the

flower medal Gappy gave her.

After this little ruckus.

“Everyone, this is a hospital after all, so quiet down!” The nurse from before reminds everyone.

“What do you mean, after all?”

Viscaria pouts,

“The main facility is a research center, and this hospital is just an additional one, so ‘after all’.”

“Goodness, fifteen years old and you’re so cocky…”

Right when I focus on their argument, “Hey!” Daisy lifts her face from my chest.

“There’s a kid I want to introduce!”

“…Eh?”

“Here, introduce yourself.”

With Daisy prompting, the nurse from before arrives before me, giving me a solemn bow.

“Nice to meet you.”

—Eh?

For some reason, nostalgia awakes within me.

“…Did I meet you somewhere before?”

“Back then, I was still a baby, so you may not know me. I was sleeping inside the ‘Cradle’ though”

—Ah…!

I have a flashback. The Cradle Daisy carried, and the name on the plate, I remember is— “Wait, you’re that…?”

“It’s an honor to meet you. I’m Gabriella White.”

The girl looks a little nervous as she lowers her head.

“You’ve grown.”

I reach my hand out and pat the girl’s head gently. The girl looks at me in shock, and shrinks back, seemingly scared of itchiness. Her face is beetroot.”

“Most of the staff in this hospital are the children in the Cradle back then.”

Daisy whispers to my ear,

“I see.”

There are a few young boys and girls smiling at me. I nod and smile back. They all cheer out loud.

The sunlight seep through the window, lighting the room. The wind ruffles the curtains, and outside the curtains, there’s a lush grassy field of the hospital with many people, and robots. I see a the nursing robot push an elderly around on a wheelchair, strolling around, and next to him, a child robot’s sleeping soundly on the knees of the human mother. The servant robot holding tea cups are serving drinks. A man dressed in work uniform calls out to a hobbling robot, and fixes him immediately. Humans and robots continue to maintain their personalities, and help each other.

Under the dazzling sunlight, children are playing around on the grassy field. Humans and robots are playing around amicably. One catches the ball, and throws it back. It’s such a simple game, but the children are enjoying themselves.’

—Since both of you want this ball—

Looking up at the ball dancing in the sky, I recall the voice and smile of the Principal.

—I shall 'half it'.

Again, I clutch at the medal on my chest. Under the sunlight, the petal in the medal is dyed gold, and as the angle of the light changes, the flower appears to be blooming for an instance.

After sending off the long winter, the world shall welcome Spring again.

Afterword

Afterword

Hello everyone. This is Takeshi Matsuyama.

The title of this work is ‘Amaryllis in the Ice Country’, but the name Amaryllis itself was something I recalled. When I was young, I had a book I like called ‘The Robber Hotzenplot’ (Written by Otfried Preussler), and there’s a pixie called ‘Amaryllis’ inside. She’s very passionate, helping our protagonist who’s stuck in a fix. This pixie called Amaryllis left a deep impression on me. Whenever I hear the name Amaryllis, I’m reminded of that pixie rather than the name of a flower.

After more than twenty years, I finally managed to have Amaryllis debut in a work. Robots and pixies are two completely different things, but cuteness and determination is a common point between them. Just to now, in the story ‘The Robber Hotzenplot’[4] , the pixie Amaryllis had ‘lived underground for a very long time’. It’s only after I finished writing this book that I realized this coincidence.

This time, I have to thank a lot of people.

To everyone at ASCII Mediaworks, and especially my editors-in-charge Tsuchiya and Araki, thank you very much for taking care of me. The illustrator Paseri has provided life into the characters. When I saw the blue hair and cute girl on the cover, I was really touched. Also, I shall give my thanks to everyone involved in the printing of this book.

In the process of writing this book, everyone involved in the profession has really helped me out. I really do sincerely apologize for causing you much inconvenience. Also, to my relatives, especially my uncle and aunt on Akijima, for providing me with support both professionally and privately. It’s thanks to them that this book’s able to be published successfully.

And finally, to the readers holding this book now, I really have to thank you. The setting of the work is a cruel, frozen world, but if you are able to feel the warmth of Spring after reading it, I as an author will be elated.

Takeshi Matsuyama, watching television with my father in the hospital ward room.

Translator's Notes

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1. [↑] Short for Grayanotoxin.
2. [↑] Plant is named after a species of Orchid called Dendrobium.
3. [↑] Sugi, short for Japanese Sugi Pine, Japanese Red Cedar. Scientific name Cryptomeria.
4. [↑] The original title: Der Räuber Hotzenplot, ISBN 0-200-71272-1.

Credits

Credits

Translation [Hellping]

eBook [Olivki]